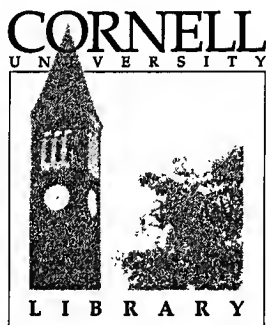


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The Snare of Strength

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CHAPTER I

‘Some are born gladiators : all women are not Griseldas ; there are men, by St. Thomas, who cannot live like bees.’

THE three men, infatuated with the beauty of their world, stood for a moment on the yellow sands, half an hour after the dawn. The Pacific was true to its name that day: the sea ran violet from eye to horizon, except upon the last shoreward dozen feet of beach, where it broke into suds, but never reached spray.

Behind them, in the Bush, the honeysuckle-trees were pressed upon by waratah shrubs, flaming their great red clubs against the bloom of honeysuckle, yellow and shaped like the brush of a chimney-sweep ; flanne-flower and native rose splashed the green of leaf and the dead-white of sand with wool-white and pink and lavender, as frequently as the scanty wheat of Maremman fields is gouted with poppies. Behind the sand-spit, white on the dunes and yellow on the shore, showed the smoke of an early steamer from Manly Beach to Circular Quay ; and far away a blue mistiness, that might have been the smoke of Sydney and might have been the haze that promises heat.

‘God ! it’s good to be young,’ said Gifford, the darkest man of the three, over middle height, but not

too tall to be of great strength ; fleshy and powerful ; dark-eyed and dark-haired. His were the big nose of energy, an under-lip full and melting, a chin of resolution, and a neck of pride.

‘ Good ? I’ll race a hundred yards under the record,’ said Daven, crouching for the start.

‘ At you !’ said Frank Abbey, a big, fair, yellow-haired man, of less resolution and of slower strength than Gifford.

‘ Go !’

Abbey and Daven ran so fast that their sinews smoked, Gifford winning easily. They strolled back to their clothes, three men as splendid as the day and as natural, with all the tailor’s shells of them piled on a heap of dried seaweed, and feeling all the joy of the healthy man in being naked in sunlight.

They raced into the water—Gifford’s face burned to olive from brow to neck, his arms blackened to the elbow where the shirt had not protected him from many years of sun, and his white body glistening strangely in contrast ; Daven, brown as a berry from neck to feet, by reason of swimming every day under strong suns, and peculiarly fair of face ; and, last of them to enter the sea, Abbey, the slow sun-god, his eyes blue as the water and his hair as yellow as the shore.

There were two white flashes in the water, that below the surface became green in depth, and one brown flash that was always ahead. The brown flash was Daven, swimming like a fish and diving like a Maori of Coromandel.

Gifford swam in water just deep enough for the rollers to lift him from the sands as they came inshore ; Abbey joined him, and Daven floated high.

‘Better than Melbourne, this, George,’ said Abbey.

‘That’s right. Melbourne’s the place to work in; Sydney is the place for play.’

Daven rolled on his side, shouted ‘Come on, you duffers! I’ll make the pace,’ and led the way seaward with an overarm stroke six feet long from the tips of the fingers of the hand at the beginning of the stroke to below his thigh at the end of it. He slipped through the water silently; Abbey followed, and Gifford came last, swimming easily, and made languorous by the divine air and the warmth of the sea.

As they swam over a shoal Gifford stopped suddenly, floated motionless, and called them.

‘Come back, boys,’ he said with an apparently unnecessary quietness. ‘See that?’

The other two floated by him, and looked to where he pointed, an object that looked like a dead seaweed lying on the yellow sand, plainly visible in the lucent water—a black and flattened star.

‘What is it, Giff—weeds?’

‘Not so loud. That’s an octopus. What’s the depth of the water here, Daven?’

The expert calculated the deceptive element, and said:

‘Under six feet.’

‘Then he’s mine,’ said Gifford, and led the way to shore.

‘What are you going to do, Giff?’

‘Stick him with a spear and get him ashore.’

‘He might be too big for you.’

‘No fear; his suckers are only a foot long. You fellows stay and see he doesn’t go away.’

‘It’s no use, Jack,’ said Abbey as Gifford reached the

beach and ran like a madman into the scrub; 'he'll have his own way.'

'He always did as long as I've known him,' replied Daven, 'so we'll talk to the pretty cocky.'

The 'pretty cocky' lay motionless on the sandy sea-floor, its parrot beak lifted a little, and regarded them with malevolent eyes.

'A foot-long sucker is quite enough,' pursued Abbey. 'It means nearly a three-foot reach, once he's got a hold.'

Gifford's nude figure gleamed white, like a statue, in the scrub. He ran across the dunes with a tough new growth of honeysuckle in his hand, stopped at the pile of clothes, took a clasp-knife from a pocket, opened the knife and sharpened the stake as he ran to the beach, galloped through the shoal water, put the stake in his mouth, and swam out to the sandbank, where Daven and Abbey watched the octopus. The three were fired with the cruel instincts of the hunter now; the cruelty that belongs to strength.

Gifford floated for a moment over the black star on the sand; then he rose in the water, threw himself to the bottom, and struck. At the moment his white body parted the green transparency the octopus ejected a stream of sepia and attempted to escape in the liquid darkness. But it was too late. The stake transfixed its palpitating body through membrane and cuttle, and Gifford came to the surface again, triumphant. He laughed as he held the stake at arm's-length, and swam through the deep water to the inner shoal, while the stricken fish-animal's tentacles reached and felt for the flesh of its destroyer, and found the destroyer's arm an inch too far away.

In the shoal Gifford threw stake and octopus far up the sand.

The three men ran ashore and again impaled the octopus, which had wriggled off the spear. They were as primitive as their nakedness; their nudity, their strength, the hunting and the fight had stripped from them the last vestige of civilization. Here was an enemy scotched already and now to be killed. They stooped around it and laughed—three splendid savages exultant over the fallen; man suddenly discovering his dominion over the beasts, as in the beginning of the world.

‘Turn him inside out, Giff,’ said Daven.

The phlegmatic Abbey laughed and applauded.

Gifford withdrew the stake, and two arms of the octopus fastened on the arm of the man, one squirmed around his thigh, and a fourth tried for a hold on his waist. Gifford laughed, enjoying the struggle, seized the body of the octopus, and fastened it over its own head; but though the parrot beak disappeared in the folds of the clammy body, the suction of the tentacles grew oppressive; and with a cry of anger he tore one from his arm, and left a spiral track of red—the blood beginning to ooze.

Daven made a movement of assistance, but Gifford said:

‘It’s a fair fight; let me alone.’

He doubled the body over itself, so that the octopus was in darkness, and tightened its grip, securing another hold with another tentacle, and waving the other four for something to cling to.

Then Gifford said something under his breath, and tore at the constricting folds, only to find himself again

seized. At last he went on his knees on the sand, thrust the stake into the octopus again, and held him, and by a great effort of strength and at the cost of pain tore himself from the cirrous embraces and stepped back—free ; but spiralled on arm and thigh and breast with livid marks as of a giant's whip, and blood-streaked where the suction had lasted longest.

‘ Licked him !’

‘ Good man, Giff !’

‘ Seems a bit cruel,’ said Abbey, whose civilization was deepest rooted.

‘ Cruel be hanged ! Snake, shark, octopus, or crow—they are our natural enemies,’ replied Gifford.

‘ Frank would like to be kind to a bulldog-ant,’ supplemented Daven ; and he grinned as if he knew a contradiction for his own words.

‘ Not much,’ said Abbey very quickly. ‘ I’d kill every bull-ant in the world.’

N.B.—He had been badly bitten a few weeks before, and his Christianity failed to anything that hurt him.

‘ You’re marked, old man.’

‘ He was a terror for his size. Good job he wasn’t the Kraken. . . . I’ll swim against either of you.’

‘ You’ve no chance,’ replied Daven, bounding to the sea.

The three heads were invisible for a moment in the deep water, reappeared, and settled down to the work, with its inevitable result of the two being beaten by the brown man.

Gifford dived and gave up the race, and called to Abbey :

‘ It’s no use trying to beat a man-fish, Frank.’

Well had they named him. The brown body slipped tirelessly through the green—the amphibious man as

mobile as the mobile element, that was familiar to him as the land.

They swam in circles for half a mile, and then headed to the shore. The sun had doubled his strength in that half-hour; and the three lay on the hot sand as happy as cats before a fire.

'Purr a bit for me, Giff,' said Daven. 'You've the most energy.'

'Can't purr; ask Frank.'

'Me! I'm too lazy to turn over when I'm done on one side,' said Abbey.

Gifford's laziness did not last long. He arose and ran about the beach, and rolled in the sand, and washed himself clean in the sea, and then stood on Abbey's back and addressed Daven and the writhing octopus as 'Gentlemen and fellow-electors,' finding his speech cut short by the human hustings moving and overthrowing him.

'Sit down, you energetic devil!' said Daven—'sit down and be a Christian!'

'Not much of a Christian about him,' said Abbey; 'he's a Greek. Where's your pipe, Mr. Pan?'

'Good idea!' replied Gifford. He went to his clothes, took his pipe and tobacco from a pocket, remembered the knife he had dropped at the water's edge, and called to Daven: 'Bring the knife, Jack; it's in the sand by my track.'

'All right; bring my pipe, too.'

'And mine, old man,' said Abbey.

Daven went down the beach burlesquing the methods of a black tracker, pretending great acumen in finding the footmarks which the moist sand had made plain enough to be felt by the feet of the searcher.

The three sprawled again, smoked luxuriously, and Gifford spoke at intervals.

‘What’s the next move, boys? What are we going to do to keep ourselves young? Where’s the next fight?’

‘At the next rush.’

‘I know that; but where’s the rush to be?’

‘North Australia’s the only place.’

‘The Central might be,’ said Abbey.

‘No fear; we know too much about it.’

‘That’s right. If there’s too much evidence there can’t be much faith.’

‘First Broken Hill, then Zeehan, then Westralia; and the whole three are too old for anything but the share market now. Then two or three duffer rushes; they put the Central country out of court.’

‘True bill, that. So it’s the North.’

‘And it mightn’t come for years,’ said Gifford gravely; for he lusted for new worlds.

‘Well, while you’re waiting, go into business.’

‘Business? I? No fear, ‘old man!’

‘There’s a General Election in Victoria in a few months: tackle that,’ said Daven.

‘He’s at it again. He has politics on the brain.’

‘Well, I know I have. It’s a game that means fighting for a man—a real man.’

‘But only a lot of doddering old men to fight with.’

‘You’d get rid of ‘em in time, and young enemies would take their places.’

‘But it’s all a joke. What do you think of it, Frank?’

‘Not in my line,’ replied Abbey, luxuriously indolent. ‘Leave it to the old men; they’re fit for nothing else.’

'That's the cry of the lazy man all over,' said Daven heatedly. 'Leave government to the old men, and you get bad government. Why, a young fellow of twenty, even if he hasn't got a penny, has a bigger stake in a country than a millionaire of seventy. When these old chaps know they haven't got long to live, what do they care if the country goes to pot? They know it will last their time.'

'That's true,' said Gifford, more thoughtfully. 'Almost thou persuadest me, John the Baptist. I think I'll try politics if a new field doesn't open soon; just to keep my fingers from picking and stealing.'

Daven was almost excited; he loved politics, and he had a tremendous admiration for his friend.

'Do, old man,' he said, 'and I'll be your secretary for a start. Only don't look on it as a joke, as you do everything else.'

'It's all a joke, Jack. Life's a joke.' He rose, saying, 'Come on. The sun's half baked me: we'll give the Pacific another treat, and then away to breakfast.'

They followed him, and the brown shape swam again ahead of the white figure of Abbey that swam before the ivory body of Gifford, barred and banded by the grip of the octopus.

Abbey and Daven returned soon to shore, and dressed, calling frequently to Gifford to do likewise; but he revelled in the sea, and they were ready for civilization before he came to the inner shoal and danced up the beach.

'He's like a kid, Frank,' said Daven, watching him admiringly: 'wants to go to bed the last and be up in the morning first, and never leave the game while it lasts.'

‘It’s his one fault, Jack; he wants to take too much out of life.’

The object of the friendly criticism ran a race with himself to dry his skin in the moving air, returned panting, and dressed himself in great haste; and the three mates lit their pipes and scaled the dunes.

The roofs of Manly and the marvellous harbour and the hazy domes of Sydney moved into view. On a gable ahead a blaze of bougainvillæa and flame-tree challenged a violet burgeoning of jacaranda; the sun leaped higher, and drove the haze away.

‘Hey!’ cried Gifford, dancing down the slope, ‘the day will go, but it’s morning yet! I praise the gods.’

CHAPTER II

‘When there is no war in thine own country, get thee with great haste into another.’

A FEW months later Gifford sat writing in his study at Brighton, overlooking Port Phillip Bay. The multiplicity of his occupations and half-occupations was in evidence on the walls and bookshelves: a picture jostling a framed ‘Miner’s Right’; an aneroid on a camera; a sectional plan of a mine, and a very dirty draft manuscript of some fearful and wonderful verse, made almost illegible by alteration and erasure; a telegraph code book between an Ovid and a Rabelais; Carne’s ‘Copper Mining Industry’ and a Bible; Church-Peterson’s ‘Nervous and Mental Diseases’ and a Tennyson; ‘Copper Smelting’ sandwiched with Shakespeare and the ‘Romance of Engineering.’ For this man was greedy and assimilative; swallowing all knowledge, and on the whole digesting it not ill. He had the truly seeing eye in his head and the true romance in his soul; but his gift of impression was greater than his capacity of expression, and so he had written very many verses with conventional rhymes, such as ‘dove,’ ‘love,’ and ‘prove,’ and ‘above,’ in them, and was only saved by his self-criticism.

He sat at his desk restively, enduring but impatient;

like a proud horse tortured by a bearing-rein; for the hoped-for new field was still in the future, and there was nought to do.

A beautiful, placid, dark woman, who looked not more than thirty-five years, and was fifty-five, sat in a low chair, and pretended to be engaged in drawing the threads of a little square of silk. Her tall, slight figure was full of peace as it rested in the chair. She drew a thread, and looked at her son for a minute; drew another thread, and looked again—a gaze of pride and adoration. It had all the maternal protectiveness in it, but also the proprietary joy of a lover; and as the man of twenty-seven had lived so quickly and stuffed his life with so many experiences and so much effort that he looked all his years, a stranger might easily have made the mistake of not seeing the pride of the mother and appreciating only the love-glances.

It was more than mother-love, because her husband had died—killed by an accident—when the child was but a month old. The horror of that sudden introduction to the fact that life is a shambles to many, had transferred the wifely affection to the infant, so that it doubled the mother-love.

Gifford pulled down the roller-top of the desk, and leaned back in his chair. His mother looked up immediately.

‘Tired, George?’

‘Tired of doing nothing, mother; this loafing is killing work.’

‘Mr. Daven says you ought to go into politics.’

‘That would be dull, too.’

‘Don’t seek for action so much, dear.’

‘Won’t it be time for me to settle down in another ten years?’

‘I suppose so, George. You must have what you wish for, or else you’ll be unhappy. And you want to fight. So Mr. Daven is coming this afternoon?’

‘Is he? Good old Jack!’

‘I asked him to come and——’

‘Persuade me to stand for election?’

She looked up smiling and blushing, so that her unlined face was exaggerated to youthfulness.

‘Yes, dear. I suppose I was sly, wasn’t I?’

‘You—sly? You’re the most transparent in motive of anybody on earth.’

‘That’s bitter and sweet: it flatters my honesty and discounts my tact.’

‘You haven’t tact except in the honest, kindly sense, mother, and a good job, too. I don’t like diplomatic people. Force is the best diplomacy.’

‘It is the most honest, but sometimes hurts itself. And there’s John now.’

She nodded and smiled as the brown-faced man passed the window, and the bare peach-trees dripped rain on him.

‘You’re the only one who ever called him John. We all say Jack.’

She replied, with all the finicky inconsistency of woman:

‘You do, but it would be too familiar if I were to call him anything but John.’

Daven entered with the freedom of an old friend, which he was and more; for he and Gifford, and in a lesser degree Abbey, had faced long odds many times together: had been rich together, and become poor again in company; had followed together rush after rush, and had made camp and broken camp so often

that cities were strange and unwelcome to them; because in a city were their family ties, and families separate men of the track.

Mother and son greeted him with a quiet pleasure that showed how much he was to them; and he said, as he said always, that he would 'take tea, thanks, Mrs. Gifford,' and he would 'have a whisky, George'; and he *would* smoke a pipe, and that the tobacco *should* be from Gifford's pouch. And these preliminaries being settled, he talked politics, his eyes brightening as he proceeded; for he loved the Bush first, Gifford second, Abbey third, and politics fourth. After these he had only likings; although there was a certain little curved, Titianesque-haired woman he had thought a good deal of; but, not being sure of securing her, his philosophical nature did not allow him to go too far with a forlorn hope.

'Nothing new, Jack?'

'No new country, if you mean that, George.'

'He's very restless, isn't he, John?'

'He's just right, Mrs. Gifford. Don't let anybody alter him.'

'And how will the election go, John?'

'Against the Government, I think. I came here to ask George to run for my old district—you know, Korringajork. I was born up there.'

'Is that near Ballarat, John?'

'Yes; half-mining, half-farming place. My father had a mine there that killed him at last. I've got a show up there myself: it's rich and dangerous.'

'Is that the alluvial mine George is in?'

'Yes; we're partners in it; and if George will run the old member this trip, he'll beat him.'

‘Anything to oblige you, mate. I’ll have two rounds with him.’

‘Now, dear, you said there wasn’t enough fighting in in it for you.’

‘Fighting? Why, Mrs. Gifford, the next two sessions will be crammed full of fight.’

‘I must do something, mother—and you ought to give me a chance to change my mind.’

‘If it will please you, do it. It won’t hurt you if you are defeated.’

‘We’ve had too many lickings not to be used to it. Haven’t we, Jack?’

‘My word, old man! but don’t laugh at things. Don’t look on it all as a huge joke. Take yourself seriously, and we’ll win.’

‘I’ll begin to believe in myself from this minute, Jack.’

‘And I know the country, so we’ll take it on together. I’ll be secretary.’

‘Thanks, old man.’

‘And in six weeks you’ll be Member for Korringajork!’

‘I’m sure of it,’ said Mrs. Gifford, excited by the prospect. ‘George will win, and he won’t be content to be a nonentity, as some of them are. George will be Premier.’

‘He shall!’

‘He’ll be Premier before he’s been in the House a fortnight, won’t he?’

‘Well, it’s sudden, Mrs. Gifford.’

‘Give me a month, mother. . . . Oh, you flatterers! Would you lead a man to destruction?’

‘My dear, if there were no conceit, there would be no ambition.’

‘ But I’m not conceited—much.’

‘ Because you’re not ambitious—much.’

‘ I don’t want to be celebrated, mother. I only want to live for ever, and to be strong all the time.’

‘ This is one of the ways to live, you old Jesuit !’ said Daven. ‘ It’s all in the game.’

‘ Good! Then I bind up all my agents to this terrible feat. Where’s the whisky? Here’s the health of the Member for Korrington!’

‘ I second the motion,’ said Daven.

‘ And I send my best love,’ said Gifford’s mother.

‘ “ Best love ” is unparliamentary,’ replied Gifford.

‘ I name the honourable mother.’

CHAPTER III

‘The comb of bees, the kiss of first love, and water to the thirsty, are not so sweet as the smile of the politician before the election.’

THE stolid, hairy-footed horse which drew Daven and the Liberal candidate for Korringajork trotted slowly uphill and downhill and through the mud; never breaking to a walk or a canter, maintaining the same speed, whether the track were metal, sand, or quag.

The cold air was stung by misty rain, and Daven buried his hands in his pockets, leaving the stolid horse to drive himself.

They passed a procession of pigs, of sleepy men driving cartloads of grunting pork, of swearing men driving pigs on foot—pigs that seized every rut as an opportunity for wallowing, and squealed murder as they were beaten to the journey again.

The candidate looked ahead, and spake: ‘My intended constituents seem very strong in the pig line, Jack.’

‘Pigs and lumber, George; and moss, and farmers who vote Tory. At least it was a big timber place once, but it’s nearly cut out. Ballarat used to get all its slabs from here once. . . . You’d have a chance to talk to this chap coming over the ridge; he’s a voter here, and he don’t seem in a hurry. Now, don’t be

afraid of wasting a ten minutes' speech on him. Catch a fellow like that, and there's more votes behind.'

The unsuspecting elector approached, to the accompaniment of his own grunts to the loafing horse he drove and the complaints of the pigs that freighted his waggon.

'D'ye know him, Jack? Introduce me.'

'I dunno him, but it's all the same. Hey, Mr. Moody!'

The noisy waggon stopped, and the driver—a wonderfully dirty man of indeterminate features, made almost unidentifiable by a stubble beard—spat on his horse, and said in a damp voice:

'Me name ain't Moody—it's Blake.'

'My mistake,' replied the cheerfully irresponsible Jack. 'Mr. Blake it is, of course. This is Mr. Gifford, the Liberal candidate.'

At first sight it seemed that one of the pigs had escaped to drive the cart, and when the candidate clasped the voter's hand, he thanked the forethought that had decided him in remaining gloved. The owner of the pigs wore much real estate on his hands, and was very amusing when considered as a guanaco. He spat generally over the landscape, and demanded the candidate's political views.

Gifford was not used to audiences so small. More courage is required to address one man distinctly than to speak confidentially to a thousand—there is safety in numbers. Gifford, in the course of a twenty minutes' statement, made known his views on all subjects within practical politics, and on many things outside the same, always excepting pigs. He dodged that subject in the attempt to be impersonal.

‘So y’s a Lib’ral?’ said Mr. Blake slowly.

‘Yes, I’m Liberal.’

‘Ho! Well, I don’t b’leve in them Lib’rals. They’d take away a man’s pigs without judge or jury.’

‘But, my dear sir——’

‘Nev’ew mind me dear sir.’ He spat on the sleeping horse again. ‘Me dear sir!’ (this with great scorn). ‘Take away a man’s pigs!’ (suddenly ferocious). ‘Never mind’ (calmly again). ‘Vote for a Liberal? Not me’ (crescendo and waxing shrill). ‘Take away a man’s pigs!’

‘Don’t be a fool!’ said Gifford good humouredly, startled pleasurably into tonicity. ‘The Liberal programme——’

‘Never mind no Liberal programme,’ said the pig man truculently. ‘I vote Free Trade, I do; an’ I don’t vote in this electorate. I vote for Mr. Pursey at Pursey’s Springs.’

Gifford laughed loudly.

‘Do you mean to tell me that you’ve no vote, and yet you keep me talking here?’

‘Yes, I do. I vote for Pursey.’

‘Dam frozen cheek!’ said the secretary.

‘Nev’ew you mind, I don’t want no Liberals. Good-day, mister.’

He spat over the scenery again, measured the distance carefully, and whipped the sleeping horse on his one cocked ear. The animal awoke with a jerk, and the cart and its grunting freight resumed the journey.

The secretary was speechless with indignation, but Gifford laughed.

‘Don’t worry, Jack; it’s all in the game.’

‘But an animal like that—taking advice from *it*.’

He threw his head back to indicate the retreating pig-cart. 'Why, he's not good enough to chew liver for orphan bears in a menagerie.'

They drove on, and the haze deepened as they entered Koomera, a place that at one time had been the home of an active community of foresters, but was now abandoned, and consisted almost exclusively of sawdust. There were miles long by many feet deep of these trophies of the assault of the great circular rip-saws on the sapful trees. All the summer they glowed, and all the winter they smouldered.

The hotel at Koomera was closed. There were many houses reminiscent of a one-time thriving settlement—ugly homes, now being covered by the merciful scrub—and two abandoned churches, one of these with a new gum-tree growing through a displaced sheet of iron in its roof—an illustration of Nature recovering its own from most flagrant art.

A young man leaned against the horse-rail by the public-house and volunteered information, and, as he seemed to be bursting from long silence, Gifford and his secretary hindered him not.

'All the blokes is away at the pig sale at Pursey's Creek, and the women went with 'em. Y' might a seen a finger goin' down the wood driving a cart wif nine pigs in it.'

He yammered on, and they brought him back with determined politeness to politics.

'You're the candidate! Well, I don't think nuffin' matters about the cove what's member now. He's a hunassumin' kinder cove—never does no 'arm, never does no good. Anyway, there's no Lib'ral's these parts now. When the sawmills stopped they 'ad to go away

an' get work. Pity yer wasn't 'ere seventeen year ago. Them was the times. Y' could a got in then—flyin'. We sent a bloke in wot was afterwards Governor. Yes, seventeen year ago it 'ud been all right for yer. Less 'n that—fifteen year ago, when the Trunk Lead was workin'. But when they was on the gutter gettin' good gold, in come the water an' flooded 'em out, an' drowned nine miners.'

'I propose,' said Gifford, 'to increase the liability of employers.'

The local man gave the statement less attention than he might have been expected to give to a spider.

'Fifteen year ago y'd a been all right—but *now*! Not that I take no interest in it. . . . Y' seen that bloke Blake? Well, that's one o' Jim Crisper's pigs he's got in with his own. Take it from me, that pig'd go over four 'underdweight, stripped. . . . An' y' won't get no meetin' 'ere to-day. There's only thirty votes 'ere, and everyone of 'em's at the pig sale.'

'So I'll get no votes here?' said Gifford.

'Taint likely, b'cause nobody votes when they are 'ere. I don't meself. What's the good o' votin'? If you don't get a bad bloke be the name of Bill, ye get a bad bloke be the name o' Jim. . . . I'd sooner vote f'r them Labour Parties meself.'

'Now, with you in a farming community, why?'

'Well, they wouldn't do no harm to us, an' they'd stop old Blake overworkin' his nippers.'

'The pig-cart man?'

'Yes, that's 'im. Dirty bloke, ain't 'e? That's why pigs is never afraid o' 'im—'e looks like one o' themselves. Well, he's got a lot o' little kids—steps and stairs—eldest one fourteen. They do all the milkin' an'

the dairy work, an' after that they go to sleep in school, an' the teacher 'e 'its 'em with a cane and wakes 'em up—poor little cows!

'Well, there's nothing to be done here, Jack,' said the candidate, and then to the elector: 'Now this time you'll go to the booth and vote for me, won't you? My programme's liberal enough, and——'

'Nev' mind yer programme, mister. I'll vote for yer, an' give y' a start. I wouldn't see no man blocked from gettin' a start. An' I don't care about the other bloke anyway. But it's a pity you wasn't a candidate when all the sawmills was goin' along the crick. I mind the time there was three 'underd men between here and Soapy Hills. See that big pile o' sawdust? It's been burnin' three year now, and it's a little 'eap. Now, seventeen year ago—that was the time for candidates. Why didn't you come then?'

The candidate laughingly replied to the effect that seventeen years ago his interest in life stopped at marbles and stilts; and as the elector, after stating that something unspecified was a pity, threatened by his demeanour to wax enthusiastic again in the matter of Crisper's pig, Gifford and the secretary hurriedly left him, stabled the horse in the deserted hotel-yard, and set off through the interminable dewings to walk towards Korringajork. All Dividing-Range men know that the road from anywhere to Korringajork consists almost exclusively of moss. The air was as damp and soft as the earth; and as during the long walk they rarely spoke, Gifford and the secretary went as softly as cats in a silence that was the silence of a Venetian midnight.

CHAPTER IV

‘Cocker thy child, and he shall make thee afraid ; play with him, and he will bring thee to heaviness. Laugh not with him lest thou have sorrow with him, and lest thou gnash thy teeth in the end. . . . Bow down his neck while he is young, and beat him on the sides while he is a child.’—*Killjoy Ecclesiasticus*.

THE mist lifted, and the moss made a running fight against the belts of gum that invaded it in little tongues. The wintry dusk found them by a fence corner, and they followed the longer leg down to a great eucalypt which bore a flapping calico sign, apparently extolling a new pig food or a corn-sheller as ‘The Farmer’s Friend’; but the other side of the tree showed them an election notice, calling on the electors of Korringajork to vote for George Gifford, the farmer’s friend aforesaid.

A little distance from the gum was a hut, a miry entrance to a milking-shed, and about it certain melancholy cows waiting, wishing that the milking had lasted longer and that the bran-mash had been as long lasting as the milking. Two dirty-legged, barefooted boys and a young slatternly girl in navvy’s boots came from the milking-shed, staggering to the weight of great cans that had secured some of the slush in the milking-yard.

A rusty black dog growled as the candidate and his secretary stopped by the gate, and at the sound a short,

hairy, thin-voiced, bent, middle-aged man, with the long, patient, half-foolish face of a plough-horse, came from the shed, and said, 'G'd evenin'.'

The secretary introduced himself by proxy.

'This is Mr. Gifford, the Liberal candidate.'

The hairy farmer extended his hand, withdrew it, studied its want of cleanliness for a moment, and then decided to allow Mr. Gifford to take the risk.

'G'd evenin', mister.'

'What's your number on the roll?' asked the secretary.

'Me name's Forby—Tom Forby'; and then half unwillingly, but forced into the hospitality, as he saw that the dusk was too far advanced for the secretary to read the roll, he said haltingly, 'Better come in an' 'ave a cupper tea.'

The secretary accepted with suspicious alacrity—he had been fishing for the invitation.

Forby proceeded then to the door and half entered; then suddenly he seemed bursting with a sense of etiquette, and backed into the rain again to give precedence to Gifford, so that he stumbled heavily on the feet of the secretary, who said that 'It didn't matter' in a tone that proved that it mattered very much.

The living room they entered, with the ancient children—childlike only in their open-mouthed wonder—at their heels, was furnished with a rough table, split and warped by sun and water; a broken-backed form with a Bible rest behind it, to prove that it had originally served in a church, and four American chairs with impossible red apples japanned on their backs. A big log fire blazed in the wide chimney, and over the fire two great pots hung from cruel-looking hooks.

Art was represented by a patchwork of newspaper illustrations ; the only framed decoration a certificate, stating that ' Thomas Forby, grazier, was a member of the Goorambat branch of the Reform League.'

The children put the milkcans on the floor while they stared at the visitors, whereat Forby told them in a harsh voice to take the milk into the skillion. They did so, straining to the overweight, and carried the milk into a room through whose open door Gifford, with all his senses alive to the novelty, saw the outlines of two stretcher beds made of flour-sacks upon saplings.

At the discovery of Mr. Forby's milk-cooling room being also a bedroom, Gifford's hypercritical love of cleanliness, already insulted by the smell of poverty-dirt, revolted ; so that but for the secretary's touch on his arm, which meant ' Remember, there's a vote here,' he would have fled the house into the preferable rain.

A slatternly woman came from another room, and cuffed a small boy who was digging the dirt out of the table cracks with a nail, and Forby introduced her.

' This is the candidate,' and as an afterthought, ' This is his seketry.'

The lady extended a knotty hand, and said : ' You ain't the ole member ?'

' No, I'm not the old member, Mrs. Forby ; I hope to be the new one,' Gifford replied, with that sweet and heavenly smile only known to earth during an election campaign.

' Y' might,' said Mrs. Forby encouragingly, so encouragingly that Gifford said very thankfully :

' It's good of you to wish me success.'

' Y' might,' repeated Mrs. Forby, but more cautiously, ' an' y' mightn't.'

'The canderdate 'ull want some tea, mother,' said Forby.

'Course they will, course they will. Mag, you go an' take baby : she's squallin'. Williee—where's Williee ?'

'Sleepin' ; he said he was tired after milkin', an' he's lyin' down.'

'I'll lyin' down 'im!' She darted into the combined bedroom and milk-cooler ; there was the sound of blows and of the voice of a weary child awaking to pain. 'What, yer won't, won't yer ? You're tired, are yer ? An' me payin' fines for yer at the school. Oh ! you won't, eh ? Out with y' ; go ter yer multerplercashun !'

A thin, freckled boy, too tall to carry his age in comfort, and having outgrown his strength, came half sleepy and wholly miserable from the skillion, and his mother added shame to his pain by beating him on the head in the presence of the strangers.

He sat down like a criminal, and was cuffed again whenever his mother passed in her work of preparing the table ; covering its dirt with eight pages of the *Protestant Standard*. At the third cuffing he became wholly awake, arose, and from the cupboard took a dog-eared book and a frameless slate—so sticky from spilled treacle and the exploring hands of the baby that writing on it was impossible.

The boy washed the slate uncomplainingly, and his mother, passing with a piece of corned brisket on a battered plate, cuffed him again in the sacred interests of education and improvement. The boy seated himself at the table again, sighed, looked at the dirty dog-eared book drowsily, and then wrote hieroglyphs on the slate.

Gifford took a chair by the boy's side and suddenly found that he was on the floor, and that the chair was not a chair, but a weapon.

Mrs. Forby laughed shrilly as the candidate rose to his feet, and remarked that 'Fallin' was a sign o' bein' successfurl.' Her husband remarked unnecessarily that the chair was not a good one; but among all those children not one laughed excepting the baby, a child of a year, and not yet old enough to be enslaved by dairy drudgery. The other children, pale, workworn, and afraid, sat silently in the big chimney, the lanky Mag nursing the child who was happily too young to work; letting their marvellous fancies rest in the shapes the coals made, making arabesques with their naked chilblained toes—bloated purple by walking barefoot through icy mud—in the feathery warmth of the spent ashes.

Mrs. Forby barked at Willie again.

'Get up, you great big umpcha, and give the gen'lman yer seat! He'll wonder how you wus brought up.'

The candidate certainly wondered how the child had so far survived the bringing up, but he said nothing but 'Thank you' as the weary boy gave him the reliable chair, and patiently balanced himself on the weapon that had overthrown the visitor.

Gifford moved closer and supported him, and asked him what he was doing.

'Sums,' said the boy, turning his eyes, lifeless and without speculation, on Gifford.

'He's very clever, if he'd only work,' said Mrs. Forby.

'What's nine times seven?' demanded Forby, not knowing it himself.

The child's face spoke mortal terror, and Gifford

whispered him 'Sixty-three'; but he was so afraid he had no time to hear, and replied, 'Fifty-six.'

'Fifty-six, is it?' asked Mrs. Forby suspiciously.

The lanky girl in the chimney opened her mouth to speak, a gleam of pleasure at being superior in knowledge of something flashing through her eyes; and then she looked at Willie, and her mouth shut tight.

'That's right,' said the candidate.

'Sure, nine seven's fifty - six,' supplemented the secretary.

Forby, not from any knowledge, but from a sense of the general and all-pervading suspicion that Willie had fallen under, regarded his son with a cold eye, and then ordered him to read from the 'pa-a-per,' the *Protestant Standard*, that did duty as a tablecloth.

All the terror returned to the boy's eyes. Truly he could not read easily; the schoolmaster's cane still tingled on his blains in proof of his stupidity—the stupidity that resulted from overwork.

He selected that portion of the newspaper tablecloth which was nearest the candidate, because it was furthest from his father, and luck gave him a stodgy leading article, loaded with dogma, with crack-jaw words like 'predestination,' and 'justification,' and 'tribulation,' which was as horrific to the boy as a frilled lizard at liberty in a boudoir would be to a Duchess.

In despair he fell back on his old trick, racking the memory that had been starved and stunted by a man's work, reading haltingly till the full phrase came to him: 'Suffer little children to come unter Me.' 'Eav-en is me 'ome.' And then very simply, 'Jesus wept.'

'S that right?' asked Mrs. Forby suspiciously, and handing Gifford a plate of beef.

He replied quickly: 'Yes; he reads very well,' and covered the sermon and the crack-jaw words with the plate. Then, to dissipate the last vapour of suspicion, he gave the boy a shilling, and said: 'You're getting on, Willie,' whereat Willie gasped, wondering if his performance had been faithful, and if he had read rightly by accident.

Forby sat opposite and ate without talking. He was so weary that he had barely sufficient energy for the meal. The landlord who had bought *his* land from the Government for ten shillings an acre charged Forby four pounds an acre rent, and Forby struggled against the clay-guttedness of his landlord and against his own shiftlessness, and ground his children into the land in the attempt to stay above it.

The boy made more painful hieroglyphs on the mucilaginous slate, writing with his head laid sideways on the table, and his protruding tongue following the blood-curdling pencil and almost touching the slate.

'Your number's one hundred and eighty-four, Mr. Forby,' said the secretary. 'I suppose you're with us? Mr. Gifford's down on the landlords, believes in compulsory purchase, for subdivision, and all that—farmer's friend, y' know.'

Gifford felt that a prouder title and a more necessary occupation would have been that of 'friend of the farmer's children.'

Forby replied slowly and painfully: 'Well, I dunno. I'm a member o' the Deform League'—he meant Reform, but he had struck the truth unwittingly—'an' I don't believe in soshierlism.'

'Your railways are socialistic, and so is irrigation.'

'I don't want no irrigation,' said Forby truculently.

'Let them that wants it pay for it. It rains 'ere six munce outer the twelve.'

'But a Liberal Government would throw more land open by compulsory purchase of big estates, and give you a chance to be your own landlord.'

'Not me! I vote Conservative,' said Forby, clinging to the leprosy whose more practical expressions were killing him. 'There is too many Cartholics in the Lib'ral Party, and that's another reason why I don't vote for no Labour Party.'

The boy had ceased his painful hieroglyphs, and now listened open-mouthed, and his mother, perceiving it, asked him if he were finished.

'Yes, I done it.'

Gifford looked at the marks on the slate, and discovered that Willie had taken the kindly-meant lie as gospel, and that he had recorded that nine times seven amount to fifty-six, and no more. He looked up at Gifford with something like worship in his dull eyes, and Gifford looked down with pity in his own, knowing that Willie would persist in the statement to-morrow on the great authority of the man who had given him the shilling, and that the cane would cut his purple hands again.

'If yer done it, yer'd better go to bed; it's 'arf-past seven now, an' ye've got ter get up at two fer the milk.'

'Poor little chap! Does he get up at that time?' asked Gifford.

'Yes, 'e 'as ter. Y' see, his father's that tired, an' the milk 'as t' be at the stashun for the Mel'bin train at fourer o'clock.'

The boy crossed to his mother and said: 'Ere's the shillun.'

Mrs. Forby reddened.

'Whatcher givin' it t' me for? 'Tain't mine. The canderdate guv it t' yer. I don't want it.'

The eyes of the children in the chimney protruded at this. They thought it might be true, but Willie knew better. He still tendered the shilling, saying stupidly :

'Y'd better take it now. I'd forget t' give it t' you in the mornin'.'

She raised her hand to strike, but remembered her company manners in time, opened her mouth to speak, closed it without saying anything, and turned on the boy a terrible eye.

He cowered under the look. He had not cowered at the threatened blow. He was so afraid that he forgot to say good-night to Gifford. He went into the skillion, the childish heart not bursting with the injustice— injustice was too common for that—but dead. He left the door open that he might have light to go to bed by, yet they heard no sound of walking or undressing ; he was so stunned by weariness and shame that his movements were as quiet as the retreat of a snake in green grass.

CHAPTER V

‘You may humbug some of the people all the time ; and you may humbug all the people some of the time ; but you can’t humbug all the people all the time.’—ABE LINCOLN.

‘GOOD to get away from there, Jack,’ said Gifford, striding along with all the new energy his horror of the bitter lives of Forby’s children had given him.

Forby had told them that they would be just in time for the meeting at Korringajork—that meant at his rate of walking. They found the distance to the township was a mile, and the time of their meeting half an hour off ; but they seized at the invitation to depart, for the experience had made the secretary irritable and the candidate heartsick.

‘Forby’s against us,’ said the secretary.

‘I’m glad of it. I’d be tempted to quit if that brute supported me.’

The mist had settled down again, and the air became colder, yet when they came to the place of meeting, which was the billiard-room of the Korringajork Hotel, there were a dozen electors standing under the inclement sky a few paces from the veranda that would have sheltered them, but superior to the weather, because they were deep in the amusing occupation known as ‘argyin’ the point.’

The secretary introduced the candidate with that open-handedness that distinguishes the secretary of almost every candidate; invited all to drink, which everybody accepted, each man pretending that he was not drinking at the candidate's expense, and thereby breaking the electoral law.

'Y' won't 'ave no meetin' 'ere till ten o'clock,' said the publican. 'The chairman's the President o' the Shire, an' he's away at the pig sale, an' there's fifteen Eytalian charcoal-burners 'ere, an' they won't be 'ere before nine. All o' 'em's got votes.'

He beckoned them out of the bar with a series of mysterious winks, and not until they were safely in his bedroom did he speak, and then it was in a husky whisper:

'I don't know what yer views was at Goorambat, but at Korringajork y've got to be agin sendin' any more contingents to the Boer War.'

'I am against that everywhere.'

'Good again! that's fust rate. We've been agin it right here from the start.'

The Italian and other charcoal-burners arrived earlier than was expected. All the farmers likely to attend a Liberal's meeting had already arrived. They slouched into the billiard-room in shamefaced silence; they seated themselves on the form as if they had all been found guilty of murder, and as if the candidate were the Sheriff, about to ask them if they had anything to say before being hanged.

The meeting waited in silence, and the mist gave place to a denser rain that pattered musically on the iron roof. Then entered the schoolmaster, argumentatively intoxicated, his overcoat steaming as he stood by the fire,

He regarded the candidate sternly as if he had caught him in theft, and he was about to punish the meeting with a speech on the promotion of somebody in the Education Department, when a bull voice roared outside.

The owner of the voice entered, dripping water on the way. Their noses told the candidate and the secretary that the bull-voiced man had been to the pig sale—several pig sales—and the bull voice roared at them that he was ‘Presedin’ o’ the Shire o’ Goorambat.’

The schoolmaster received the information contemptuously, stating in polychromatic language that he didn’t care if the bull-voiced man were President of Hell; but the President was too full of importance to hear anything unflattering, and began a speech introductory of the candidate—a speech that lasted half an hour—while audience and secretary fidgeted in their seats. The candidate seized all the humour of it; he had begun the campaign seriously enough, but the pretence and injustice had wearied him, and now the comic seriousness of it all made him regard all politics as a huge joke, which they mainly are.

The bull-voiced pig farmer was so inspired by the glory of his own position as chairman, and by the rum he had taken at the pig sale and on the road, that he lied fearsomely. He appreciated, he told the meeting (but in no such common words as are here used to report him), the honour of being chairman to the candidate, whom he untruthfully stated he had known from childhood. He could sympathize with the candidate, although the mean and ignorant persons of the audience might not be able so to do. *He* had felt the pangs of public life; *he* was a public man. *He*

had been for two months President of the Shire of Goorambat. He and the candidate were the only two public men there present.

At this last the schoolmaster, who was Premier in the local Mock Parliament, whenever he was sober enough to lead, snorted violently.

The bull-voiced man maundered for half an hour, and then the candidate wearied of him, and stopped him forcibly; and the audience applauded, more for the eclipse of the pig farmer than in welcome of the politician.

Gifford addressed them on land laws and closer settlement, and various other things, with a subtle suggestion running through all his speech that he, Gifford, was the millennium, although he never spoke directly of himself. In this is contained the law of the profits of the politician. Through it all the chairman supplemented and interrupted with short statements about himself, public life, the fierce light that beat about the throne of the President of the Shire of Goorambat, the Pursey's River pig sale, and the advantages of a classical education.

The schoolmaster sniffed at this last statement.

'Education!' he said; 'where did you find it? In the pig-sty?'

The President answered curtly but half afraid:

'I knoo Latin afore you was born.'

The secretary demanded silence for his principal, but the schoolmaster muttered like a soaped geyser before the soap has had its full effect. During the meeting the two snarled at one another, and the candidate's peroration was lost in the bull roar of the chairman on the subject of Latin and the shuffling of many

bluchered feet steering for the bar. The secretary followed them and paid for drinks, and then escorted his principal to bed.

‘There’s Pro-Boers here, and there’s Baptists and Orangemen, and you must keep clear of it all, and the pig chairman and the schoolmaster will be at each other’s throats before daylight.

Gifford went to bed, but not to sleep. For an hour the President of the Shire of Goorambat and the schoolmaster wrangled over the meaning of ‘aqua’ and ‘homo’ and other abstruse words, and at 4 a.m. the little fiery black-moustached schoolmaster fell on the bulky President and beat him into clamorous howls.

A perfervid Imperialist sang ‘Gord save our grayshers Que-en!’ and a charcoal-burner of Republican tendencies struck him once, and stopped the music.

When Gifford and the secretary drove off at daylight to pick up the express to Melbourne, the President of the Shire of Goorambat sat on the veranda nursing a very black eye and swollen cheek, but still swearing with alcoholic solemnity that ‘he knew Latin before anybody was born.’

From the scrub came the cooees of wandering intoxicated charcoal-burners, lost in the perplexities of the black woods and the wattles.

‘It was a bad meeting, Jack,’ said Gifford. ‘There’ll be very few votes for us at Korringajork.’

‘You never know,’ replied the oracular Jack; ‘you never know.’

At two miles from Pursey’s Creek the mist lifted just in time to save them from collision with a sleepy horse, who drew a light waggon very slowly, going at

his own pace in his own direction, as his driver had tied the reins to the brake and slept.

The secretary shouted to him, in damnation of his carelessness, and the weary head lifted a little and then fell again, too full of sleep to be troubled by less than an earthquake. It was the boy of Forby's returning from his midnight journey to the station with the last night's milk.

In the train Gifford met his opponent, 'the ol' member,' and that gentleman was so pleased with his receptions by the electors, that he felt compelled to tell Gifford how often and how loudly and how long he had been cheered, and at that Gifford felt he had embarked on a forlorn hope.

But politics produces queer anomalies. When the polling day came, the old member found that he had received all the cheers, and that the new candidate had nearly all the votes. Gifford was declared elected as member of the Legislative Assembly for the electorate of Korringajork.

CHAPTER VI

‘He was once a Mayor, but rose to be a hangman.’

GIFFORD, with three other Parliamentary colts, had taken the oath, had moved the Address in Reply in a speech covering all things from Protection to the necessity for a new necropolis, and had barely achieved ease in bobbing to the Speaker during an exit from the Chamber, when the Conservative Opposition, filled with the desire to carry out the noble duty of succeeding to the salaries of the Treasury Bench, joyfully counted heads, and discovered a majority of six.

In another week the neophytes were sitting in Opposition, released from the hard work of excusing the misdeeds of one Government, for the easy and pleasurable occupation of criticising all the acts, good and bad, of another.

The new Government was a marvellous thing — forced into power, partly by the property vote and partly by a newspaper that insisted on Cabinet rank for its own small family solicitor; headed by a lawyer, who was supposed to be strong because he was so unhuman that he had no human weaknesses. The weaknesses of a man are most evident, and public opinion searching for these, found them not, and finding

them not, accepted without inquiry the strength which did not exist.

The frigid Premier's colleagues had been carefully selected, so that there should be only one King in the asylum for the blind. The Attorney-General was selected because of his bitterness to all other religions than the right one, which was the right one because it was his, and which was his because it was dominant. The Minister for Education had first been a bacon-curer, and then a suburban Mayor, and then a Member of Parliament. His rise—or fall—from more or less honest bacon-curing to more or less dishonest politics would have been nothing against him had he not succeeded to the habits of the hogs he had slain. The portfolio of Education had been given to him probably that he might attend to his own; yet so little did he know, even of his original occupation, that he spelt 'pigs' with two 'g's.'

The other members of the Ministry were make-weights. A gentleman, very estimable as a Rechabite, but otherwise valueless, was made Minister for Mines, because he represented a country district where he was safe, although his only knowledge of mining consisted in having once lost twenty pounds in a lignite syndicate.

The Treasurer was a city representative, and his reputation as a financier rested on the fact that in the last land boom, although he could not keep his own money, he was able to lose other people's also, and in a way that called loudly for imprisonment.

Of course, the Cabinet had its platform man—an honorary Minister, who never made a speech, even on the Rabbit Extermination Bill, without quoting half a dozen pages from the classics. For him the

world had not moved since the days of Pitt and Fox.

Gifford had amused himself during that week of marking time by watching the alarums and excursions of the Ministers elect and those who hoped to be.

The bacon-curer-Mayor,-Minister-for-Education, had suffered the agonies of Tophet before he at last got the word which made his prefix of 'honourable' sure.

He came to Gifford, and was so anxious that he perspired, although the day was wintry.

'I suppose I am to congratulate you, Mr. Hoggins?' said Gifford.

Hoggins perspired violently and tried to laugh heartily, but was so indecently fat that he choked over it. It was barely safe for Hoggins to smile.

'No, no!' he said; 'I don't want a portfolyer—at least, I don't care for hoffis.' He mopped his face, and head, and neck, and hands, and repeated nervously, 'I'd rather not take hoffis—I don't want it.'

He went away nervously; his attempts at smiling indifference in public showed how poignant were his private agonies.

The disproof of his statement to Gifford he himself provided next day when he knew that his position was secure. The knowledge of his new importance had stopped the perspiration and given him an elephantine solemnity which was intended to be dignified.

Gifford's success had been even sweeter to his admiring secretary than to the politician himself. Jack Daven's interest in 'the game,' as he called it, never flagged. He loved the moves, the intrigues, and the chicanery as a chess enthusiast loves chess, although

he was personally as honest as he was plucky—able to win without exultation and to lose without regret.

His principal had barely entered on his new life of publicity, that was often uncomfortable, before Daven suggested the opportunism of an intrigue for power, and to that end he brought the Member for Boomanoo, one Dr. Graham, also a green politician, and introduced them.

Graham was the antithesis of Gifford—a blustering, irritable man, full of energy and brusque kindliness. They were friends from the beginning, by reason of their differences; and by-and-by an act of their leader's, who was indecently hungry for the flesh-pots of office again, drove them to form an independent party of two. Their position as a party seemed hopeless, but it was not. The Directory of France started business in 1795 with an old table, a sheet of paper, and an ink-bottle; but Napoleon's whiff of grape-shot blew power and money to the modest beginning. And the party of two was strengthened when Jack Daven joined them by reason of a by-election for Teddywaddy, and the party became a power as three.

The Government fell by reason of its unspeakable Treasurer, and went into Opposition utterly discredited; and the Opposition, only a little less than utterly discredited, succeeded; but the Independent party of three held to its corner, and gave a discriminating support to anything it believed in, whether the thing had its origin on the Right or the Left.

The party of three became four by the defection of Curran, the beloved man of the House. He had little ability of the head, but he had an ability that was worth more to him in securing his ends than mere

genius would have been. His brains were in his heart, and that is the sort of genius immediately discoverable even by a baby or a dog. No man who opposed him in his constituency could hope to escape destruction. Opposition to Curran were blasphemy. The abilities of Demosthenes, Machiavelli, Pitt, Fox, Mirabeau, and Danton, collected in one personality, could not have affected his seat for Cooroo.

‘Oive trown ’em over, Giff,’ he said. ‘That gang—I’ve shtuck t’ thim troo tick an’ tin, because they phromised me a racecoorse railway from Campbells to Cooroo; an’ now they say they can’t foind the money this Parlymint, so I’m wid you; an’ when ye’re Primeer ye’ll put the money on the estimates, will ye?’

Gifford laughed—a Premiership seemed very far off; but he promised the customary bribery and corruption, and the four went down Collins Street very justifiably happy, as the party had increased its strength by twenty-five per cent. in half an hour.

CHAPTER VII

‘The anvil is not afraid of the hammer.’

A BIG fleshy man, with a blue eye that challenged the sky to rivalry and was full of sly humour, and the brownness of whose skin was half native and half acquired from an explorer’s knowledge of the sun, rode along the northern edge of an amphitheatre in a limestone range, looking for an opening to the west.

There was the suggestion of the beginning of a drought in the land—the bottle-trees darkened in their foliage; the salt-bush more seeding than leafy; the deciduous broom withering; the wait-a-bit thorn dry, though still ready to hold the intruding traveller’s clothing, because the thorn dies hard; and the cotton-tree, so hardy that it splits the marble of the ranges and is the last of all but the fig-tree to succumb, budded, from its dry and leafless limbs, its big flowers, all glossy and yellow.

In the still heated light of the waning afternoon chance sent to the adventurer a pilot—a plain-turkey that started from a belt of scrub, ran at the solid range, turned a corner, and disappeared.

Ned Hoskins, otherwise Ned the Prodigal, jabbed his heel into the sides of his sweat-caked horse, and

strained the halter of the despairing pack-horse he pulled after him.

‘There y’re, Jack; that’s the way out.’ He spoke to a black-and-white cattle dog that wagged his tail and went mad with pleasure whenever his name was mentioned. Ned rode to the place of the disappearance of the turkey, and found an opening half a mile wide, cunningly concealed by the folding of the purer limestone, which had not weathered, and as he rode through it, Ned the Prodigal said: ‘We’ll call this Bustard Pass, Jack.’

The pack-horse, who had not been spoken to, replied by tripping over a table of limestone, falling almost on his knees, recovering himself by throwing all his weight on his halter, and so half-dislocating the shoulder of his owner.

Ned the Prodigal cursed the pack-horse, but in a moment had returned to the consideration of the country Bustard Pass opened for him. It was another great amphitheatre: the soil, where denuded of vegetable covering, showed a bright-red, hard loam, speckled with little iron slugs; a great solitary rock rose from the centre of the circus, and its two pinnacles decided the fanciful Ned.

‘I’ll call you Tower o’ London. Gord luv me! I lived within three mile of it when I was a nipper, and I’ve never seen it—only pitchers of it.’

He jerked sharply at the halter of the pack-horse, who had dropped his head to snatch a mouthful, altered the course a little north of the line of the Tower of London and brought into view another rock, denticled at its summit.

‘There’s a bit of the Big Smoke again, Jack. There’s

Westminster Abbey—what I 'ave seen, and no pitchers. There can't be no mistake about that. . . . My grief! this is a big country. . . . Wonderful big! . . . Bigger than all Europe, Jack, and only a few thousan' people sittin' down in Sydney and Melbourne. . . . Gord luv 'er. . . . She's great, is Australia. . . . Four days 'ave I been ridin' through 'ere, an' not a soul 'ave I seen, white or black, or yellor or piebald—not a man 'ave I seen; not a nigger. . . . 'Ello! there's three 'roos all in line, hoppin' very graceful, and an emu behind 'em. . . . Must be on a pad.'

He looked at the sun and marked him sprawling to his daily death; gave a sharp, bird-like glance at the gravely hopping kangaroos, and the ridiculously stately emu, walking with the self-conscious and ungraceful undulations of a woman in long stays; saw some birds flying above the track of the animals, and, having decided, pressed his heels to the barrel of his horse. The horses had already responded; they had scented the invisible water and trotted through the salt-bush to the line of the kangaroo pad—a track worn deep as a wheel-rut by generations of animals athirst.

It was a granite pool in a creek that had ceased to have any surface flow, and there the Prodigal camped, hobbled his horses, and lighted his fire.

While the water was in course of boiling, the Prodigal took a pick from the pack, still talking to his dog, and went into the tall spear-grass; breaking out-crops, setting fire to the country to clear it that he might prospect it the more easily. The darkness fell suddenly on him, and interrupted the energy that always called for excess to quench it. He broke another stone, took up the few pieces of it, and returned to the camp, to find the water

boiled away. He refilled the billy, and while it boiled examined his find—a broken nodule of iron, and for its core a beauty of red oxide of copper starred with crystals of calcite. The dog sat on his hind-quarters looking at every motion of his friend with a concentration and intelligence that were human. ‘It looks good enough, don’t it, Jack? . . . N.T.B.S. mate, that’s what it is, an’ we’ll ‘ave a look at it t’-morrow.’

They ate together. The dog had his half-pound of meat and the licking out of the tin as dessert. He lapped the water of the granite pool for a moment, returned, and lay by the Prodigal; but the man arose to make the water-bag and provisions safe from the ravages of ants, and the dog, divining his wants from long experience, went before him, selected a tree whose smooth bark promised not to be a harbour for insects, and wagged his tail in his great satisfaction, while the Prodigal hung the water-bag and the sugar-bag to the branches.

They returned to the fire—the nights being as cold as the days were hot—and the dog settled himself so that his head was under the Prodigal’s hand.

‘Now, if there’s anything like a run o’ that stuff about ’ere—there’s more to be got, Jack. . . . Lissen t’ the water runnin’ into the granite hole out o’ the soakage. . . . It’s like music, ain’t it? . . . That was a good op’ra comp’ny we seen at Brisbane, Jack. . . . What was that op’ra ’Oward Vernon played in? . . . The Chineyman piece, Jack? . . . Y’ don’t remember? . . . Let’s see; it was “Mikado.” So we’ll call that last pass between ’ere an’ Westminster Abbey, Mikado Pass. . . . An’ we’ll call this Op’ra Creek. . . . An’ if the copper lode’s any good we’ll call it

Ierlanthy. . . . Gord luv me! . . . That was a pretty op'ra, Jack. . . . All them girls dancin' about with wings, an' the poor little cow what had been kep' under water with the frogs for twenty years an' more, because she'd 'ad a baby. . . . Them fairies that did that to her was jus' like wimmen, Jack. . . . An' the "'Ouse o' Lords!" 'E was a clever bloke that wrote that, Jack—cleverer than me or you. . . . An' if we get another reef beside the Ierlanthy, we'll call it the Girofla. That's a pretty op'ra, too, but it ain't as good as "Ierlanthy" or the Chineyman piece. . . . So you get inter yer pew, Jack, an' go to bed.'

He rolled the dog off his blankets, and the dog pretended to bite him, and they played at fighting back and forth until the Prodigal's blankets were twisted into ropes.

With the dawn he prospected the new lode, and followed it for nearly half a mile, finally deciding that the new find was worthy to be called the Iolanthe, and should be so known.

For a week he backed and filled west and north, prospecting the country in zigzags, and found other lodes, so that the Girofla did not end the application of opera nomenclature.

'The one we was on to early this mornin', Jack, is the Patience, an' this one's the Gonderleer. But what 'll we call the whole field, Jack? . . . That's what's botherin' me.'

He had pegged all his finds as by law provided, and it was only when camped in the lime east of Bustard Pass that the name came to him.

The camp was under a great fig-tree wherein nested many lime pigeons. They cooed softly whenever the

smoke from the camp-fire or the noises of the strangers ascended to them.

‘Curukity coo! Curukity coo!’ said the Prodigal, in imitation. ‘No; it ain’t exactly that, I know. It’s coo-coo-roo—like that, Jack. . . . Why, ’ere’s the name of ’er! Coocooroo she is.’

He rode east next morning, carrying with him samples of the copper lodes of Coocooroo—a name that was yet to be blessed or cursed by most men who heard it; a name that was to set a few cities ablaze for a year or two, and leave a crop of misery for ten.

CHAPTER VIII

‘A coward often deals a mortal blow to the brave.’

NED the Prodigal went no further south than Sydney, where he met Berkshire—a man who cast a queer globular shadow by day or night, so rotund was he. Berkshire was a man who believed in himself so much that he never admitted to himself that he deceived others. He had made an adventitious financial beginning, and it whetted his appetite; thereafter he was utterly unscrupulous. He deceived even himself so much that, in his place in the Victorian Parliament, as Member for Combenico, he voted Tory with the self-sacrificial air of a patriot, and advocated almost tearfully the retention of the property vote as the Reward of Thrift; by which name he styled his various public depredations.

There was much surplus money in the States by reason of good seasons, increased export, and lavish public borrowing. Money was a drug continually cheapened by private investments from England and Australia was ripe for a boom. More, it cried for one, as a child cries to be allowed to spend its penny to-night, and not to wait for the morning that may never come. Berkshire formed a small syndicate,

telegraphing to Gifford, Daven, Abbey, and other acquaintances, who replied in careless affirmation of the gambling risk—small by design, so that the prospector's interest might be further reduced when he enlarged the capital—despatched an expert with Hoskins to examine Coocooroo; manufactured values by writing the word 'Capital,' and after it a sterling mark, the numeral 1, and four ciphers. Then he returned to Melbourne and waited, employing the time in making many disjointed speeches to the effect that the property franchise was of Divine origin, and that exclusively manhood suffrage would keep capital out of Australia. And Berkshire wanted all the available capital of the world to come into Australia—so that he might steal it.

During the waiting for the expert's report the existence of Coocooroo was never publicly mentioned. The men of inside knowledge on the Stock Exchange, in the city, and in Parliament, quietly secured gambling interests at slightly enhanced prices; but the public—the little people, who pay, as usual—heard nothing while the fruit was ripening. Berkshire—thrifty man—sold piecemeal from the beginning, standing on many thicknesses of velvet, but still holding the share of a lion, when he was but a fox.

Gifford had treated his gambling chance carelessly, as it demanded. He was full of the excitement of politics now; his party had grown by secession and by-election to seven. It was only by their assistance that the Government saw its certainty of reaching the harbour of recess. Gifford despised the Government, but he distrusted the Opposition, and therefore he kept the Opposition out of power.

A few days before the recess Gifford, at dinner, found his mother unusually talkative of a new experience.

Just think, George! My old friend Mrs. Field! I haven't met her for twenty years, because they lived in New Zealand till her husband's death . . . an awfully bad man he was—as bad as she is good. And she's an invalid now; sits on a chair all day, and when she goes out she has to be lifted into the little pony-trap they have.'

'Poor woman! What's the matter?'

'Partial paralysis, dear—brought on by shock, the doctors say. . . . And she's had such a painful life, but she's just as sweet as ever.'

'Poor woman!' said Gifford again.

'They have one daughter—a very nice girl.'

'Pretty?'

'Oh yes! . . . Fairly handsome.' She never openly stated any spinster to be beautiful. It was her one deception by suppression, dictated by her desire to keep her son to herself. Later she said to him: 'Of course, we talked a lot of you.'

'Why "of course," mother?'

'Oh, because you're a public man, and they've heard a lot of you, and I told her all about us. Poor Marion! What a bright girl she was! We used to tell each other everything. . . . So I've asked them to come and see us, and they'll be here next Tuesday afternoon. Marion can't go out at night.'

'I shall see them, then?'

'Ye-es, I suppose so. But won't you be at the House?'

'No; the prorogation is this week.'

'Oh!'

‘Why?’

‘Oh, nothing important!’ But it was; she was afraid of Miss Field, and hoped he would not see her.

Her mother fear was ill founded. Two days later Parliament prorogued with much eighteenth-century formality and gun-firing and other preposterous performances; and on the same evening the expert telegraphed a favourable report of Coocooroo, and on Friday Australia woke to the fact that it was again in the fever of a boom.

Gifford saw his holding increased a thousandfold, and plunged into the Maelstrom of false values. The long-quiet city blocks that held the offices of scores of financial leaders and their attendant jugglers began to swarm like hives of disturbed bees; and on the Monday night Gifford, Daven and Abbey, and scores of speculators big and little, crowded the trains and began their two-thousand-mile journey north. In the limestone ranges the pigeons said ‘Coocooroo’ sleepily; the same word was uttered from hundreds of excited hoarse throats in every city of the continent. ‘I buy Coocooros!’ shouted the raucous voices. ‘Coocooros!’ screamed the smaller men. A false crop came already from this seed, that was yet barely above the soil: ‘Coocooroo Explorations’; ‘Coocooroo Estates’; ‘Coocooroo Blocks’; ‘Coocooroo Mining’; ‘Coocooroo Investments’; until the word lost all the dulcet softness of its origin, and was as hard as the gambling counter it had become.

CHAPTER IX

‘ Smile and we smile, the lords of many lands ;
Frown and we smile, the lords of our own hands ;
For man is man and master of his fate.’

THE road went steeply upward to the dividing range, which hid the freak of the tropical forest below—a freak that no self-respecting geological conditions would have been guilty of. The change from volcanic soil seventy feet deep, bearing tree-life on its every square foot—cedar, bean, silky oak, and crow-foot elm, laced with lawyer vines and protected by stinging trees—to the rolling stones of the granite and sandstone mountains, with their infrequent belts of stunted gums, had been made in a hundred feet. The volcanic plain lay in starlight ; the ladder-steep range was powdered by an endless rain ; and in the misty darkness an army of adventurers walked up the mountain as if it were a level lawn, and left the lightened and ambitionless horses toiling painfully in the rear.

They laughed as a man slipped cursing into a hole in the road ; they breasted the ascent as happily as children go to play ; for here was the culling of a continent—sons of men who in their time had been the pick of the wide world. Courage, endurance, high heart, and soul of cheerfulness, were all here, all old

losses and old efforts as forgotten as present hardships were unheeded ; for before them was the new rush, the alluring gold of the rainbow. Almost every other man there had had god-like successes and cataclysmal failures ; and past success and old failure alike were forgotten ; not so much in the hope of future gain as in the pleasure of newness—the new tracks, the new ways, the new pains, and the present struggle.

They were almost all strong, greedy, generous, hard, kindly, pugnacious men, most of them as full of good feeling as they were ashamed of showing it ; paradoxes of abnegation and excess ; intimate mixtures of altruism and selfishness ; fighting fiercely for their own hands for all but one of their waking hours, and suddenly becoming for that hour as open-handed as the first flush of summer. They drank the world like wine, and they spent it like water.

The short-sighted man who lives in cities and counts his success by results would have weighed the efforts of these men by their bank balances ; but these, the strong, the untamed, and the primitive, knew better. As small boys struggling joyously against the often unkindnesses of their marvellous land of rain and drought, bloom and dryness, the excesses of their land had become native to themselves ; they knew that the game is always greater than the stake.

Here the hypocrite partially discovered himself, or was partially discovered, and suffered the hell of continuous reprobation by a crowd. In this primitiveness a man became what he really was—part angel, part devil. The man who had been apparently all angel did not come here. If he had, his righteousness would have crackled to powder in the flame of the ridicule of

these men, who did not fight a fraud, but laughed it to death and sneered it to dissolution.

Further, most of the adventurers were half prospectors, half agents, of the coastal town. They had a little more polish and education than the bulk of the men who hunt gold, for the rush was to Coocooroo for copper; and gold—the primitive metal that needs but to be picked up or beaten out of the rock to become currency—attracts the most primitive. So the return to the aggressive hatred of sham—that is the salient characteristic of the savage man—was not so complete as it would have been in the ranks of gold-diggers who depend only on sweat and experience. The gold-digger sheds his skin, and is proud to be morally naked to the bone. These copper-hunters were merely always stripped of their clothes, and as natural as the Little People of the Cities are at night; when the corset-clips are loosed and the padded waistcoat is put off, and the faces that have been grinning for social recognition, or the poor tongue that has been lying all day that it may find food for its owner and his children, lose their wrinkles and their weariness, and are left to know themselves in the dark. For with the first house came deception, and the civilized man, seeking the wild again, finds truth in the first tree.

Among the cheerful toilers of the mountain were Gifford, Daven, and Abbey, their happiness at again finding the freedom they loved increased by the knowledge that they had not to seek wealth at the new field; that they already held their interests in Coocooroo, and were approaching the find of Ned the Prodigal as proprietors.

And all this kept them in the van of the army, reeling

off the miles tirelessly and laughing at the rain; finding the city habits of the last three years fallen from them as a garment, their blood leaping, unconsciously to themselves, in anticipation of the excesses that no man at such a time might keep clear of and live.

Three hours after dusk saw them far ahead of the horses in the dizzily-built township of Nigger Creek, a town without foundations, stuck to the sides of a mountain as swallows' nests cling to eaves or house-flies to walls. The rain was endless there; all the adventurers were wet through, but the superb strength of them all prompted them to further imprudences as a means of reducing the strength that surged in them.

A big man, none other than the finder of Coocooroo, stood by the bar counter of the Star of Australia Hotel, and emphasized every other word by banging the counter with a great fist that set the glasses jangling.

The three mates pressed forward at the call of the miserable little man behind the bar, a one-time jockey, now, by virtue of his liquor license, King of the Night. He ordered the drunken customers to make room for the new-comers.

'Get a move on, you fellers. Now then, quick and lively. Give the new chaps a chance. Keep yer 'ands off the counter, Ned.'

Ned the Prodigal glared. 'Why, yer little sossidge—I've et ten o' you at a coffee-stall!'

'It's all right, mate,' said Daven soothingly.

'Right y' are. You're a good-lookin' cove, too, you are! So's yer mates. 'Ere, 'ave a drink along o' me. I'm Ned the Prodigal. I prospected Coocooroo.'

'Is Coocooroo as good as the Sudden Jerk?' asked Gifford.

Ned the Prodigal put his glass on the counter and looked around suspiciously, as he asked: 'Who said "Sudden Jerk?"'

'I did!'

'You! Let's have a look at yer. Why! I know yer. You're George the 'Orse.'

'George Gifford is my name.'

'That's right, mate,' interposed Daven; 'he was known at the Peak as George the Horse.'

Ned the Prodigal explained to the crowd: 'He was called George the 'Orse 'cause he once beat a 'orse runnin' a mile. Can yer run as well now, mister?'

'No; I'm a bit older now.'

'Eh! outer condition. So'm I. Been boozin' for about a fortnight. 'Ere, Billy—Billy Matthews! Give everybody a drink.'

The ex-jockey turned to show that he was attempting to fill a dozen orders at once, and Ned turned to Daven.

'You were at the Peak, too?'

'I was; I was underground manager of the Extended.'

'I thought so. Stick to minin' an' foller the rushes, an' y' can't miss meetin' old friends till yer dead. Yer other friend was there, too.'

'Yes,' said Abbey. 'If you ever saw one of us the other two weren't far off.'

'S that so? Well, I like to see good mates. I could naver keep one mate long; two er three times it was me temper, but mostly it was this—the mates being twicers, and loafin' or boozin', when there was work on.'

'Did you prospect Coocooroo without a mate?'

'Yes, barrin' a dorg . . . An' I lost 'im. A good mate 'e was; knoo more'n a man an' wouldn't take

advantage of it . . . A cow poisoned him on me out California Creek . . . What 'll ye drink mates? . . . Hey! Mr. Sampson, 'ave a drink?'

Sampson, a big, gray-bearded, blue-eyed man, replied : 'I've got some friends here.'

'Never mind, bring 'em all—bring all Australia, if it 'll come an' drink fair.'

Sampson and his friends—Majory, Burns, and Forsyth—joined them, and they drank, while Ned the Prodigal, by virtue of his right as the payer for the drinks, talked, and the guests, by virtue of that Bush law, which is incontrovertible because natural selection has made it, listened.

Majory, Burns, and Forsyth were all small of bone and big in muscle, all young, all slight, all blue-eyed, and all bald. This premature baldness had made them known on every mining camp in the continent as the Three Graces. For the rest, they were ideal mates—Majory, the very well-read man, who loved talking and used excess as an alterative; Forsyth, who loved his wandering life for its romance, and could listen wonderfully well, and drank to oblige his mates; and Burns, who read not at all, drank only when he chose, and was always uproarious as if he were a boy of ten, and not a man of forty.'

'Drink up again, mates!'

A dozen voices rose in protest : 'No fear—it's mine!'

'It's mine!'

'It's mine!'

'Leave it to Billy.'

Billy spoke. 'You pouch your stuff again, Ned; no double bankin'—if the others want t' shout. Tell y' what. . . . This man, George—'

‘His name’s Gifford.’

‘Well, Mr. Gifford he shouts, and then — what-ever y’ like!’

The liquor introduced them all. In twenty minutes Daven was arguing with a beet-red bullock-driver whom Daven never knew but as ‘Red Mick’—the white men following the custom of the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, calling a man by his most identifiable feature, as Gifford had been named ‘George the Horse.’ Abbey was engaged in a consideration of the country he had never seen before with a fresh-skinned, young little man, who had no distinctiveness, and was therefore called by his real name, which was Taylor; Gifford found a friend in a congenial spirit—half horse-master and half clerk—a man who seemed to have been born to a snake’s knowledge of the Bush and Chiron’s mastery of all horses—one Charlie Byers. Gifford had appropriated Byers because of Sampson’s praise of him.

‘Look at his eye,’ said Sampson, as they stood watching Byers. ‘I’ve been a dozen times to Coocoo-roo, and I know a few short-cuts, and some secret water; but that chap could go across Australia once and he’d know every gully before he came to it on the way back.’

‘Marvellous.’

‘It isn’t; he can’t help it—it’s a gift. He made a blaze-tree line for a road twenty miles long. Simply rode along it without a compass, and didn’t add a hundred yards to the track that wasn’t wanted. He’s blazed road-lines in drought-time, and when the rain came they found he’d taken the road away from all the soft places.’

‘And what’s he doing now?’

‘Nothing ; the damned fool wants to be a clerk.’

‘Why?’

‘Oh! he’s struck on Annie Johns out at Girofla, and she won’t marry anybody who won’t settle down.’

‘Poor devil! And I suppose he’ll find it hard to give up the track?’

‘Hard! He’ll find it hell. . . . Of course, he won’t give it up at all. He’ll promise to till he’s married, and about three months after she’ll see that he’s miserable and she’ll let him go.’

Gifford heard a voice behind him, a voice that was Abbey’s and was not. He turned and saw that Abbey had a new gleam in his eye as he ordered all men to order their drinks. The lymphatic Abbey had been caught by the current of the excess, and was being carried away by it, like a common man.

The night went on in wassail, and quarrel, and song. Ned the Prodigal, waxing melancholy for a moment, said: ‘I’ve ’ad a ’ell of a time. . . . Oh, you coves don’t know. . . . But I left me old mother. I’m a dorg. That’s why I call meself Ned the Prodigal. . . . ’Ave a drink, the whole box an’ dice o’ ye.’

The babel rose and fell: two score men talking all at once on diverse subjects—the mines that had been, the mines that were, the mines that were not, and those that were to be; the tracks to Coocooroo, the water stages, the certainty of a drought, and always the invitation to drink.

‘Do you think the field will last, Ned?’ asked Gifford of the Prodigal, as the continuous emptying and refilling of the bar shuffled the men, as a player shuffles a pack of cards.

‘I think it will, mate, but I don’t like it much. I

don't know 'ow I got on to it, seein' I was lookin' for gold, an' a man only gets what he's lookin' for. Y' see, I like gold becos gold, brings the free 'eart after it, an' copper brings the Jew inter the game quicker'n gold does.'

Sampson joined them. 'Have another drink, Mr. Gifford?'

'I'd rather not, Mr. Sampson. I think I'll put the peg in.'

'At your age? Why, I'm not going to put it in yet for twenty years, although my liver's not too good after a burst now.'

'All right then; I'll have a whisky.'

'Beggin' yer pardon, y' won't,' said Billy Matthews. 'Y' can't get no more 'ere t'-night.'

'Why? Who are you to tell us when to stop?'

'Y' can't, because there ain't none. It's all gone.'

'Gin, then.'

'No gin, n' no rum; there's ginger ale and stout.'

'How much stout?' inquired the Prodigal.

'Three cases and two bottles.'

'Put the lot into buckets then.'

'It's too cold, Ned.'

'Nev' mind, we've got a fire, ain't we—we'll mull it.'

'My oath!' said Billy. 'We've got two dray axles.'

'Ooray! out with the bodkins an' put 'em in the fire.'

They broke the bottles into buckets, heated the dray axles, and mulled the black liquor, and the babel became pandemonium, while the fragile ex-jockey attempted marvellous feats which no one noticed. The worst musician in the world played his one larrikin vamp on the piano, and a dozen men roared a dozen songs to the one accompaniment—one of them drunkenly lachrymose, yelling a marvellous version of 'Abide with me';

a Frenchman, beginning the Marseillaise and becoming indignant when he found that no man would act as audience that night, as all wanted to be performers.

The sentimentally regretful :

‘ For night and day they’re sadly waitin’
For the ship that never returned.’

‘ Chorus, you chaps.’

‘ Did she never return ?
No ! She never returned.’

But there was no chorus, and he stopped disgusted.

An Italian, bewildered by the unlaid drinks of whisky and stout—

‘ Tromma lari lara
Viva l’ amore.’

Red Mick: ‘ I’ll sing “ Come, birdie, come,” if any o’ you chaps ’ull do the echo.’

The men who were still sober enough to have a sense of humour howled him into indignant silence.

A man who had determined to achieve recognition and applause at any price—who had paraded the bar with bank-notes twisted into pipe-spills, and displayed in his hat-band, behind his ears, and protruding from every pocket to show his contempt for wealth, and yet had failed to find an audience in all that whirling strength and childlike egoism—now called the attention of the company to his existence by loudly stating that he could break a door-panel with his head. A shower of derision descended on him, but did not damp his desire to ‘ show off.’

‘ Break yer head with the door, y’ mean.’

‘ I’ll break that there door with me head.

‘ Garn—ye’re a skiter !’

'You assault that door with yer 'ead, an' yer dried brains 'ull rattle out like seeds outer a dry pum'kin.'

The 'show-er off' lowered his head like a ram fighting his spring battles, dashed at the door, and rebounded into the centre of the bar.

The men around him laughed and applauded, so inciting him to further injury of himself. At the fifth blow on the door the timber became more resilient, and the rebound threw him on his back against the counter. He rose to his feet, half dazed by the blow, but alive to the sweet praise given him by the audience, who flattered him between the yells of their own laughter.

The man, who had hungered for the applause, recovered almost immediately, although at intervals he clasped his head very tenderly with both hands. Then he said :

'Well, I near did it ; didn't I, chaps ?'

'You did, mate—you did.'

'Is there another man here could do as much ?'

'There's not another man in Queensland could do what you did.'

His craving for notoriety was satisfied and his cure complete.

'Come along, Billy,' he said to Matthews, with a suspicion of the patronizing tone of a conqueror. 'Give all these 'ere chaps a drink.'

A man who had no friends, and whose original place none knew, but was said by his fellow tin-getters to have been a priest, sang very softly :

'Ave maria,
Gratia plena,
Dominus te-cum,
Benedic—ah—ah.

He was asleep.

And then some obscure genius who knew to strike the time and place as surely as Rouget de Lisle struck the Revolution with his song of the Marseillaise, sang a chanty they all knew, humming softly until he was sure of the audience :

‘ I put my hand upon her knee,
Said she, “ Young man you’re rather free.”
No more I’ll go a-roamin’ with you, fair maid.’

‘ Chorus, chaps !’

A score of mighty throats answered him :

‘ A-roamin’—a-roamin’—
To roam it was my ru-u-in ;
No more I’ll go a-roamin’
With you, fair maid.’

At the fifteenth verse Ned the Prodigal, who had been engaged in deep converse with Taylor, the youngest recruit to the arm of the spoil, broke into sudden indignation :

‘ Why, yer ignorant little pup, I tell yer I can ! I’ve done it often. Give us a long beer-glass, Billy.’

‘ Now, don’t go bitin’, Ned.’

‘ Mind yer own interferences. Give us a glass.’

The Prodigal took the glass, bit a great section out of it, crunched the glass in his teeth and swallowed it, looking at the frightened youngster as he did.

‘ There,’ said he. ‘ What yer think o’ that ?’

The youth gasped and said : ‘ I could believe in nature, but you’re superblanky natural. You’ll be a stiff ’un to-morrer.’

‘ Me ! Not me ! Y’ can’t kill me with an axe. Look ’ere, I’m that strong that after I’ve been in the Bush

a bit, an' get down t' Brisbane, I 'ave t' walk in the middle o' the street or I'd pull the 'ouses down. Strong! That's why I drink! If I didn't drink sometimes, I'd pull the trees up be the roots. I'd jump outer me skin. . . . Look 'ere——'

He raised his fists and struck himself a dozen terrible blows on the chest, talking all the time, bit another section out of the tumbler, ground it to powder, and swallowed it; and then called all men to drink, probably because all of them, to whom glass-eating is common, had failed to notice his performance.

'Come up to the trough, all o' yer!'

'Can't 'ave no more drink to-night,' said Billy Matthews firmly. 'There's not a drop o' anything left—nothing—absolute nix; not enough to drown a fly in.'

There was a dead silence as the skeleton made his statement of the tragedy. Many, recognising the inevitable, said 'G'-night,' and went away.

Sampson spoke: 'Go an' get some more, Billy.'

'I tell yer all's gorn, an' the other places is closed. Why, it's two o'clock.'

'Are you sure it's all gone?' asked Burns.

'I said so, Mr. Burns.'

'But you mightn't be tellin' the truth,' said the gigantic glass-eater.

'Do ye want t' call me a liar?' demanded the dwarf fiercely.

'No, Billy—no, Billy! I'm afraid of yer; that's why,' replied the Prodigal, grinning at the farcically small opposition.

'Y-ye can 'ave ginger ale, if y' like.'

'Billy,' said Sampson, 'that's an insult.'

The bar almost emptied of men. The six stayed a few minutes longer, willing enough to sleep, but hating the unconsciousness that sleep brings—the nightly death, the waste of an hour of the glory of life—even as sleepy children cling to the toys and weep, begging for but another minute of the light.

CHAPTER X

CHARLEY BYERS, 'the complete bushman,' led them to Coocooroo in a day and a half, his bushmanship leading them across country, so cutting off many corners. Gifford, Abbey, Daven, and the Prodigal made up the party, five superb men on superb horses, a condition the horses knew as well as the men did, so that five splendid centaurs filled the track with pride.

They found at Coocooroo a feverish determination to spend the first half-million of working capital with as little delay as possible; the general manager, greatly dignified by his big salary, which was more than the combined wage of a Prime Minister and a Bishop, and about equal to the salary of a Governor-General, loomed large. There was nothing wrong with the salary—it was big enough to have purchased an initiative and administrative genius, and as such was small; but the general manager reduced his functions to those of a Governor-General, which are the functions of a rubber stamp.

The mine manager was also much in evidence—a thin, exclusive man—and at sight of the two Ned the Prodigal grunted and predicted ruin to Coocooroo.

Men raged rather than worked at smelter building, railway construction, bridges, culverts, and dams, and other surface work, as if the end of the world were

near, and there was to be no hereafter. Thousands of navvies laboured and ran about and fell over one another, and picked themselves up and raved to work again, like a colony of bull-ants swarming to the repair of their broken nests. Construction trains fumed over unballasted lines at dangerous speed, sweating to break fifty thousand cubic yards of clay from this cutting and a hundred thousand yards of rock from that, and building a bank fifty feet high to tie a spur to a plain ; a rake of ballast squealing on the impossible curves from ballast pit to permanent way, and then slowing down, while the ballastmen shovelled it from the moving waggons, the galloping navvies sweating till they smelled like convicts. A gorilla of a man led this raving mass of energy, shovelling ballast on to the naked new permanent way as if seven devils inspired him and a hundred horse-power engine gave him steam ; calling on the skulkers, shaming the weak into heart-broken attempts to march with him. His arms, long enough to reach to his knees, plied the short shovel with a tireless swing, that distributed five shovelfuls of ballast at every stroke. The measurement of his chest was the measurement of his height—five feet. He spat tobacco-juice in an almost continuous stream, and shovelled, and cursed, and harried, and insulted, and so earned his extra shilling a day for making the pace. A brave brute in the clothes of a man ; and his only name, even on the pay-sheets, was Tommy the Dog.

‘ They’re working at the wrong end,’ said the Prodigal. ‘ ‘Ardly doin’ a tap o’ good work in the mines. An’ what’s the good o’ the railway an’ the smelters if they neglect the minin’ ?’

At the smelters a thin black-bearded man, riding a

white pony, gave a dozen orders at once, and each of them clear-cut and definite, despite the speed of the instructions. He was introduced to Gifford and Daven and mates as Hempel, the company's metallurgist. Abbey he had known before, greeted him affectionately, and asked for tidings of his wife.

'How was she looking last time you saw her, Frank?'

'Fine, Bill.'

'I thought so; but she'd write cheerfully if she were dying. How's Australia?'

Abbey flushed to the roots of his hair, and replied stammeringly: 'She's very well, looking beautiful.'

'Glad to hear it. All you fellows come to my camp any night, will you? Can't stay now. Got to go over to the kilns about the lime, or my bricklayers'll stop. . . . So long! Don't forget to come.'

He finished the sentence as he rode away—a tempestuously energetic man, wanting to do all the work of the world to-day, as if in fear of eternity beginning to-morrow.

'He's in a hurry, Frank.'

'He always is; but he's as good as three men, and, in spite of his hurry, his methods are perfect.'

'But who's Australia?'

Abbey flushed again. 'Miss Field. She is a friend of Mrs. Hempel's and—er—mine.'

'Why do they call her Australia?'

'Mrs. Hempel calls her Stralie for short. Her uncle was a real red-hot Republican; said he wouldn't die happy if he wasn't sure Australia would be a Republic one day. He was her mother's brother, and her mother called her "Australia," and made him god-

father. He was a good old chap—left the few thousands he had to Miss Field when he died.’

‘And wasn’t his name Burnett?’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘And isn’t her father dead?’

‘Yes. He wasn’t much chop, either. But how did you know?’

‘Why, my mother and Mrs. Field were friends as girls.’

‘Oh!’ responded Abbey very shortly, as if he did not like even the intimacy of a dead friendship.

They rode from Cooooroo through the avenues of marble and the amphitheatres of limestone to Emu Rock, where Hempel’s new house was abuilding, and on to Girofla; and all along the road every little outcrop of copper and silver-lead had its windlass, its wind-sail, and its little dump of white, green, and orange.

There was not one man workless. Here was the millennium—plentiful work, high wages, and cheap money, and not one human in the land sick or hungry. The millennium comes to every new country between its depressions. When it stays permanently, it will only be a boom without a slump to follow.

Buggies full of eager speculators forced the horsemen out of the road and the resultant dust-cloud; and on a tree near Girofla there was a vilely-written, ill-spent notification on cardboard to show that the human instinct to gamble was here being stretched to its limit:

‘The Sweep on Melborn Cupp will be drored at Sam Sing’s Stoar, near the Black’s Kamp.’

Jimmy Johns, the licensee of the Cliffs Hotel at Girofla, was a right-hearted, wrong-headed man, of violent, if temporary, sobriety, alternating with baresark

sprees. He was the stepfather of Annie Johns, and for that reason Charley Byers led the party past the Miners' Arms, which was the superior place of entertainment, to the home that held his fancy.

Annie Johns was the life of the score of girls and men who had assembled in the long cracked dining-room of weather-boards; but her smiles changed to dulness as she saw her unwelcome lover enter, and to smiles again as she saw that he was accompanied, and as he introduced her to his friends. She was a brown berry of a girl—dumpy, plump, round, brown of hand, face, eyes, and hair, and looked as if she were Daven's sister.

'Will the gentlem'n play cotton-windin', Mr. Byers?'

The gentlemen said very politely that they would, although they wished themselves out of the entertainment; but Delia Mills, the daughter of the man who held the little cattle-station at Emu Rock—great in the matter of acreage, but very unimportant in the number of cattle it carried—took charge of Gifford and Abbey, and gave them great reels of cotton to wind, laughing as their unpractised hands missed one turn in four, and so left them hopelessly out of the race.

Gifford finally abandoned it in serio-comic despair, and looked at Delia, as she stood with Annie Johns, regarding him in a swift, all-seeing, intuitive way. Gifford's eyes gave him this impression of Delia: tall and immature, slight and big-boned, a round, smooth face, big brown eyes, a nose big enough to give her character, very dark hair, and a big mouth, very mobile and prodigal of smiles.

While he so regarded her, she said rapturously to Annie, using that all-descriptive phrasing of women:

'Oh! isn't he a perfect love?'

‘Who—Charley Byers?’

‘*Him!* No; that dark love there—Mr. Gifford!’

‘Oh, I suppose he’s all right!’

‘You’ve no eyes, Annie. . . . Here’s Mr. Byers looking as if he were dying. I won’t play gooseberry.’

Either this loverlike desire to see lovers alone or the wish to be nearer the ‘perfect love’ decided her to leave Annie as Charley Byers came up. She went to Gifford and helped him to wind the cotton, talking the while disjointedly, and looking up at him with her strange, worshipping, school-girl gaze, that said she was not yet in love with a man, only in love with love. Glad of any chance of escaping from an excuse for sociableness which seemed to him ludicrous, he at last said he must look after his horse, and she was forced to let him go.

Said Byers to Annie: ‘Will you say “Yes” now, Annie?’

‘It depends.’

‘But I’ve given up the track. I’ve got a job with Tom Locky as clerk.’

‘The manager of the Red Hills Mine?’

‘Yes. I’m to do the correspondence; and I’ll stick to it, if you promise.’

‘Let’s see if you do stick to it first.’

‘I will. You’ll see. And if I stick to it, you’ll be Mrs. Byers, won’t you?’

‘Oh, I suppose so, but not till you’ve stuck to it a long time—till you’ve forgotten the Bush.’

He knew in the back of his brain that that was not possible; but, loverlike, he promised to compass even the superhuman, and made such a lover’s movement towards her that she retreated a step, and said:

‘You try to kiss me, Charley Byers, with all these people looking on, and I’ll slap your face.’

He laughed, and said : ‘ Well, come outside, then.’

‘ I won’t—there!’

She shook her head to emphasize the refusal, repeated it, and went with him.

He was in disgrace again before Gifford left Coocooroo. He bore the martyrdom of his clerkly service for ten days, and then he saddled his beloved horse and rode west, a free man.

CHAPTER XI

‘For never yet did I behold one of mortals like to thee ; neither man nor woman. I am awed as I look upon thee. In Delos once, hard by the temple of Apollo, I saw a young palm-tree shooting up with even such a grace.’

GIFFORD sat in the white-hot sunlight with all the pleasure of a snake upon a rock, for he was a hot man, and like called to like ; and he hated cold as he hated death, of which truly it is the symbol. The raffle of people who made up the guests of the Speaker’s garden-party thronged the palm-studded lawns at the Parliament gardens ; the majestic building itself turned the yellow of its stones into glare in the heat ; even the cool bluestone walls of St. Patrick’s Cathedral found their own haze of heated air.

The pretty women drooped like flowers, the ugly ones reddened to beef colour ; and a new horror was added to the afternoon by the necropolitan blackness of the clothes and hat of a teetotal member of the Legislative Assembly, a man who couldn’t smile, and was therefore elected because he was an ‘earnest man,’ whatever that may be ; and by the thick black squeakful boots of half a dozen doddering Legislative Councillors, who couldn’t remember anything happening later than the year 1862. Where their intellects had stopped so had their clothes ; the unloveliness of the Victorian era was

in them, and in their women-kind exaggerated to burlesque.

The wife of Millenet—the statistics' crank of the Assembly, a thin, weedy, mercantile formula of a man—looked cool and charming, daring and victorious, among the faded lilies and the painted peonies of that afternoon. While they sat under trees or haunted the refreshment tents in a continuous consumption of ices, Gifford and Mrs. Millenet walked pleasantly in the open, a scarlet sunshade giving her pale face a delicate colour, and slightly relieving the oliveness of Gifford's complexion. She was tall, thin, large-mouthed, and had big violet eyes that were always pleading. Her dead-gold hair was always parted in the middle and fastened in a knob that had all the exquisite softness of a refined woman's hair to the touch, while in its form it had all the hardness of a coronet. This simple coiffure gave her a demure look, which her pleading eyes helped, her luscious mouth, more like a great overblown flower than flesh, cast suspicion on, and her high cheek-bones contradicted. She was childless, melting, conceited, and soft; a woman who, without desire, was greedy—one of those who want a piece of everything that shines—and she had a husband who lived in figures.

She talked without cessation, unless it was to pause for applause, or to note the effect on her companion of an apparently careless, but intentionally direct, question of himself. She laughed and talked and laughed again, once going over the edge of flippancy into a refined vulgarity, but recovering herself before she had shocked him much. Her friends said there was no harm in her, and they were right; her enemies that there was little

good in her, and they were nearly right. She had a squirrel's brain, which is good only for remembering nuts, and cannot remember for more than a week. Her sense of honour was little more than a word, and as fragmentary as a flying fish's knowledge of the sun.

'Just look at that awful crowd, Mr. Gifford,' she said, looking more like a ripe peach than a woman, as a highly respectable and very stupid Legislative Councillor passed with his painfully ugly family. 'Whenever I see that awful woman and her daughters I can shut my eyes and see six horsehair chairs against the wall and two china dogs in the fender, and a stuffed parrot in a glass shade, resting on a wool mat, with twenty pounds' weight of Family Bible at the corner of the red tablecloth.'

He laughed, glad to lead her away from talking of people, and said:

'These Early Victorian furnishings were shocking, weren't they?'

But she got back to the forbidden track.

'Yes. And how tough they are! How they live! You can't kill them. I went to those new people the other day. Oh, I can't remember names. They had awfully pussy statuary all over the place. You know—little girl with a baa-lamb, little boy with two peeky birds in a nest.'

'I know—fully clothed, to cover bad modelling.'

'Yes; and made attractive to the people who don't know by tricky little carvings—lace petticoats and all that sort of thing.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Lots of money they've spent because they have it.'

'And no taste because they didn't have it?'

‘And in the drawing-room—overloaded with pictures it was: you know, all the soft, pussy kind—that awful old woman showed me with great pride her bridal orange blossoms under a glass shade. Ha, ha, ha!’

‘It’s certainly inartistic, Mrs. Millenet; but every man isn’t refined in his romance. I suppose it was the poor woman’s way of saying “I remember.”’

‘You’re the only romantic politician in Australia, Mr. Gifford; but I’m sure she didn’t do it for that.’

‘For what, then?’

‘Oh, I think she meant to say, “I’ll anticipate anything against my character; there’s my marriage lines.” You know how vulgar these people are in being so careful of their reputations.’

She laughed a laugh full of her own vulgarity. The slang she used, and which she would have called brutal if uttered by the uneducated with the aspirate neglected, she regarded as smart when spoken in her own cultured tones.

She became more daring in her criticisms and more loud-toned in her flippancies; until at last he looked at her to see if she were affected by the heat, and found her still the same cool, peach-like creature, her fine skin blushless, although she had been talking bowdlerized women’s club language; which is Rabelais with most of the coarseness and all the wit taken out and much of the suggestion left in.

She led him to a refreshment-tent, where a kindly, undecorative lady, closely related to the Premier, entertained a dozen friends, and showed a terror of embarrassment and an agony of self-consciousness; so that the long flapping lace sleeves of her gown trailed through tea and coffee, and over ices, and upset two

cups of coffee unwittingly, and deposited the collections on the clothes of her guests. Had the spoliation been mentioned to her, she would have collapsed. As it was, she smiled at the guests her self-consciousness; and the guests cursed her silently, hiding damaged skirts, and grinning like the Spartan boy.

Mrs. Millenet's laughter amused Gifford. It was a mixture of the irresponsible giggle of a girl and the laugh of the boy of twenty who laughs because the sun shines, with something of the malevolent cackle of Quilp. And suddenly the band began the most human expression extant in music of love, heart-break, and despair; the sound of the wailing brasses for the impressionable Gifford shut out the sun and turned the sky to blackness.

'Robert, Robert, toi que j'aime.'

Almost imperceptibly she drew closer; she was as impressionable as he, but more consciously so, and consciously ever ready to make impressions.

'Isn't that sad, Mr. Gifford?'

He rather resented the breaking of the silence.

'It's sad and glad.'

'And mad and bad, and had and lad,' said she flippantly. 'I used to read it when I was a teeny, weeny baby in arms. "A sad cat makes a flat hat," and things like that.'

She looked in his face for applause, saw none there, dropped her eyes, and let the music steep her in languor again. But she could not remain quiet for a moment.

'Don't you think the world is very full of sadness?'

'Not very. Look at the happy crowd to-day.'

'Oh, these! A lot of ugly women.'

'But they're all humans; they can all feel.'

‘Oh, they can’t. They’re most of them animals.’

This brutality of exclusiveness in a man would have caused Gifford to end the acquaintance; in Mrs. Millenet’s presence it made him physically uncomfortable, and she saw it.

‘There! I’ve offended you. You believe in equal rights and the Labour Party, don’t you?’ Her eyes filled with tears, but she continued without waiting for a reply: ‘Oh, I didn’t mean it; but everybody misunderstands me—everybody. My husband doesn’t understand me. Nobody does.’

She might have added that she did not understand herself. She shed a few more tears, and Gifford would have been greatly embarrassed, but that to this unconscious Lilith there entered Eve.

The white head of a Supreme Court Judge, the dandy of his time, leaned more than chivalrously to her as she came from the Parliament Buildings to the lawn.

Abbey, uneasily self-conscious, and smiling all his uneasiness, walked at her left. Behind them came Daven, his head bowed and sideways like a lover, bending to catch the emptiest word of a little curved, dimpled, Titian-haired girl, as if all her utterances were new revelations of Nature, which, after all, they were.

The music reached its Himalaya of agony.

‘*Oh, mon bien! mon bien suprême, toi que j’aime*——’ And Gifford, lifted by the music, saw *Her* for the first time—Woman the Roborant, Woman the Weakener, Woman the Blood-stirrer. Immediately he forgot that Mrs. Millenet was at his side, as this dark-haired beauty of the clear, pale face, the firm mouth and chin, the straight nose, the arched black eyebrows, and the great ropes of hair, soft and lustrous

as silk, advanced with the Judge. He murmured a word of excuse to Mrs. Millenet, and stepped forward to meet them. In her eyes and on her forehead were pride, and in her walk—erect as a peasant woman of Tuscany, and as if she had carried head-burdens from childhood—there spoke perfect health, the majesty of youth. She walked as walked a happy queen to her bridal in those days when kings and queens *were* kings and queens, chosen for their beauty, their courage, and their wit.

He felt that she was curiously like his mother, or as his mother had been in maidenhood; and then, the introduction being compassed, he turned to introduce Mrs. Millenet, and saw how the peach and pink handsomeness of the fair woman shivered into insignificance in the presence of the majestic beauty of Australia Field. Daven's inamorata was introduced also, and the three women regarded each other narrowly, easily disguising their feelings from the blind men. Miss Field and Miss Marsh—the Mrs. Daven-to-be—had already settled in their first moment of meeting that, although they could never be warm friends, they were naturally-pleasant mutual acquaintances; but that may have been because Miss Marsh was certain of her possession, and knew that Miss Field had no desire to steal it. Now, since she had been introduced to Mrs. Millenet, Miss Field was at one with Miss Marsh—they regarded Mrs. Millenet with conscious enmity at sight, their woman's intuition showing them the snake under the leaves. They looked at her in half-frightened reprobation, as peaceful traders regard a pirate; and Mrs. Millenet answered their dislike with defiance, glaring for a moment like a cat in dudgeon.

Abbey and the Judge walked ahead with the ladies to find seats, and Daven and Gifford followed.

‘Isn’t she pretty?’ asked Daven.

‘Pretty! She’s perfect.’

‘Eh?’

He followed Gifford’s glance, and saw it resting on the figure of Australia Field—the apotheosis of grace and beauty.

‘I meant Miss Marsh.’

‘Oh yes, of course. What is it, Jack? Serious?’

‘As serious as it can be. We’re going to be married.’

‘Good luck to you!’

‘And you’re to be best man.’

‘It’s a deal, mate.’

They rejoined the party, and the forces of natural selection paired off Gifford and Miss Field, so that they talked interestedly, half to the exclusion of the other, and Abbey watched his one-time mate with unfriendly eyes.

Of the seven of the group only the Judge was happy, and that only because he was too old to see that he was *de trop*. Miss Marsh and Abbey wished that the Judge would go away and that Gifford and Mrs. Millenet would leave also, so that the two pairs might be together and yet separated enough to feel the tie of a solitude of two. Daven wished for nothing, being dully unhappy, for that communion with the beloved was made impossible. Miss Field and Gifford were unconscious of surroundings, being half shy and half satisfied in each other’s presence; and Mrs. Millenet’s squirrel brain teemed with unpracticable revenges on that dark woman whom she hated at the beginning, but trebly so now that the defection of Gifford had dealt this almost mortal blow to her vanity.

CHAPTER XII

ABBEY'S gaze lingered on the garden at Hawthorn, trying to be gay in its autumn dress; then he latched the gate and walked slowly away. The thin graceful woman, etiolated by seclusion and weakness, nodded kindly to him as he passed into the road, but he was too downcast to notice the action of farewell.

Stralie entered the room, but did not sit down. She moved about the room, giving deft and unnecessary touches to the flower-holders.

The youthfully bright eyes of the invalid followed her for a few moments, and then the invalid spoke.

'Has he asked you again, Stralie?'

'Yes, mother.'

'And I suppose you gave the usual answer, dear?'

'Yes, mother.'

'Poor Frank!'

'I say "Poor Frank!" too; but it's no use, mother, I can't like him—not that way.'

'He's a good man, and I'd like to see you settled.'

Stralie looked at her then and laughed.

'I should be settled in more ways than one.'

'Very well, dear, don't think about it. You know best.'

'My instinct is all against it, mother.'

‘We won’t say any more about it, dear.’

‘We won’t, then. Oh, these blundering men! They keep on doing the thing that hurts them. If I wanted anything and couldn’t get it, I’d forget it.’

‘I believe you would, dear; but you’re very strong.’

‘Oh, it isn’t all strength. Pride would make me avoid the people who didn’t want me, even if I were madly in love.’

‘You don’t understand, Stralie. Everybody warned me of your father, and I knew he was not a good man, but I had to have him.’

‘But you weren’t as proud as I am, mother.’

‘Yes I was; but when love comes pride goes.’

‘There’s May. I’ll go and meet her.’ She was glad of the interruption. All debatable ground seemed to lead to the appraisal of the unwelcome lover, and she ran to the garden and brought back Mrs. Hempel, wife of the metallurgist of Coocooroo, a pretty, plump, bouncing woman, full of energy and impulse, with two life interests—her husband and Stralie, and one life sorrow—her childlessness.

Stralie seized her, clasped her waist lovingly, and forced her to skip along the garden path to the veranda, where Mrs. Hempel arrived roseate and half breathless.

‘This is one of your madresses, Stralie. You act the chatelaine of thirty nearly always, and then for a moment you forget you’re twenty-two and dance like a school-girl.’

‘So glad to see you, May!’

‘You’ve refused poor Abbey again.’

‘How did you know?’

‘I met him near the station, and he said “Good-

night" although it's afternoon, and then ran away. Why do you do it, Stralie?"

'It's no use, May. I can't. And if you bully me I'll sulk.'

'Oh, I won't bully you. You can't help it, I suppose. But Frank is such a good fellow, and if you married him Will would be so pleased.'

'My dear May, I can't marry the whole world to oblige your husband.'

'I should think you wouldn't, to even oblige the whole world.' Then, in a voice full of quick suspicion: 'Is there anybody else yet?'

'N—no, no!' said Stralie, colouring for an instant, thinking of Gifford, and wondering if she had spoken the absolute truth. 'How could there be? And I've refused Mr. Abbey three times.'

'Yes, I know. Well, we'll wait. One of these days you'll give in.'

'I will not.'

'You will: no woman can hold out for ever.'

'That may be. . . . But I can. . . . Mother, here's May. I'll leave you two to talk, and I'll make the tea.'

She left them, wondering if she could really believe herself; for the new man haunted her, not as a memory, not even with tenderness, but as a persistent thought.'

For the first time the deep and steady current of her life was changed into something of that restlessness that attacks roving men in spring; and it was partly as an outlet for the new fever that although usually a semi-recluse she made many social engagements, it may have been in the hope of meeting him. She had not seen Gifford for two months; only their meeting, emphasized by the ill-concealed petulance of Mrs. Mil-

lenet, existed to identify him, and that she might have forgotten but for Abbey's most recent expression and repulse, which had set her, half-unconsciously to herself, comparing the two men.

In that time Gifford had had no time to spare for mere woman. A dissolution was threatened; his party was growing; Curran, with the grievance of his Race-course Branch Railway rankling, had become a tower of strength; the one-time Corner party, helped by the compact little Labour party, had been so recruited that, except in name, it was the direct Opposition; and power seemed very near.

For weeks Gifford had, after the time-worn custom of country members, received visiting constituents, had given them drink for themselves or subscriptions to local temperance lodges, according as to whether they were the more human and less costly drinkers or the clammy and expensive teetotalers. The members cursed their too-fond supporters while greeting them with the smiles of trapped foxes, which were intended to mean a cheery welcome; they were dragged around the city by despotic electors who wanted something from every shop in Melbourne, and were unable to buy without the advice of the legislator—given personally and on the spot; and they did not dare to revolt because the threatened dissolution gave the elector power, and the elector knew it.

One of Gifford's recruits, Rockingham, the representative of a suburban constituency, had resigned his seat three months before.

'Simply can't stand it,' he said to Gifford, who naturally strove to avert the probable loss of a vote. 'I was earning five pounds a week before I got into

Parliament. I gave up the work when I was elected, and tried to live on my Parliamentary screw. And when I came to reckon it all up—contributions to charities, football clubs, cricket clubs, and all the rest of it—I have two pounds a week to live on; and blackguarded by everybody into the bargain. I'm full up, Mr. Gifford; I'm going back to hammer rivets into boilers again.'

'But some of the old hands manage to dodge these blackmailers.'

'Some of 'em do; but it takes three years to know how, and I can't spare the time.'

'I believe in having a country constituency; all your constituents are too far away from Melbourne to bother you,' said Daven.

'Don't you believe it,' replied Rockingham. 'I've never been a country member, but there must be a pain in it somewhere. You can't tell me that those farmers who are always cadging from the Government can be careless enough to let their representative off everything. If he doesn't pay one way, he will another.'

'I haven't found it so yet,' said Daven half stubbornly.

'You will.'

The retiring legislator's prophecy became fact a few weeks later. Melbourne was invaded by hordes of people of indecisive faces and intellects of the bovine order. They came to the great agricultural show, and before three days of their visitation had passed Daven said, almost helplessly, that he believed that all his constituents and their women and children had come to plague him. For all that, he danced attendance on the more conscienceless of them, who thought that

because they had voted for him as a politician they had created him as a man; and in the interval of rest, which was from midnight to two hours after dawn, he confided to Gifford that he despaired of ever succeeding with Miss Marsh by reason of his enforced absence from her.

Now that the courtship was established and the bridal near, Daven in the autumn did the honours of the city with even worse grace, knowing a dissolution was near, caring nothing for politics when weighed against a hair of the beloved, but holding it because Miss Marsh liked the distinction his seat in Parliament gave to her.

Mr. Thomas Forby, the child enslaver of Korringajork, had not been a supporter of Gifford's, but when he came to the city he called on 'our member,' and made exceedingly miserable the life of that now ambitious man.

'Course I was one o' the Deformed League lars time, but I'm open ter conviction,' said he, in a tone that was half-promise, half-threat; and Gifford hoped that the conviction might be for a capital offence. 'Don' want yer t' do much,' continued Forby. 'I'm independent enough, Gord knows. All I want is for yer t' get me an' the missus inter the debate.'

Gifford felt so relieved at the assurance that he became cordial to Forby, asked him to drink, and inquired with an unsimulated interest how Forby's affairs were.

'Splenderd!' replied Forby, his long pale horse-face lighting almost to enthusiasm. 'Milkin' seventy-nine now.'

'And all the children well?'

‘Yes; one more since you came.’ He drank, and added with the air of a man who would do his duty to the nation even if the heavens fell: ‘That’s seven all told, an’ steps an’ stairs they are, from Willy down.’

‘It’s a big family, Mr. Forby.’

‘I believe in big families—that is, f’r men at dairyin’. Why, d’ye know, I don’t ’ave to pay wages f’r more’n three weeks in the year. The children do it all.’

Gifford thought of the old-man child Willy and his chilblained hands, of the gawky girls standing barefooted in the icy slush of the milking-yard. His gorge rose, and with difficulty he suppressed the desire to smite Forby on the top of his flat head. He consoled himself with the belief that he had only to introduce Forby to the Speaker’s Gallery and see him never again; but the promise of independence was Forby’s way and the Victorian farmers’ way, to yell night and day of their independence and resourcefulness of character, until the day when they approached the Government to beg again for remission of rent, for reduction of railway rates, or for some other form of blackmail of the people of the cities.

Forby haunted the House for two days after that, dragged Gifford into deputations that begged the Government to spend money at Korringajork in useless public works and roads to nowhere, and, after the deputations were exhausted, he cursed his representative with his acquaintance and blighted the soul of that progressive legislator with his conversation. He led Gifford to rope-works to give his valueless opinion on binder twine, although Forby had no crops to reap, and was never likely to have any; begged Gifford to accompany him to the purchase of a tin of tea, and

succeeded, buying the tea with the flourish of a man taking an option of purchase over the continent; borrowed four pounds, and thereafter became a limpet.

He lay in wait privily for the weary Gifford, and Gifford fled from him on the fourth day; turned into Bourke Street an hour later, and found his enemy again.

‘Hello!’ said Forby; ‘I was lookin’ for yer.’ And Gifford reflected on the fate that encouraged this man to look for another man in a city of six hundred thousand people, and to find that man without difficulty.

‘I am very busy,’ said Gifford. His patience had been exhausted long ago, but recognition of the cheapness of Forby’s intelligence, and possibly the politician’s newly-acquired tact, had to that time saved Forby from direct insult.

‘Well, I was goin’ t’ arsk yer to come an’ show me the Gov’ment Butter Stores.’

‘I’ve no time.’

Forby sighed, grunted malevolently, as if to say that the Reform Leaguers at Korringajork would be duly informed of this neglect of an elector, smothered his resentment, and said resignedly, ‘I’ll walk with yer down the town, anyway.’

‘I must leave you at Collins Street, Mr. Forby. I tell you I’m busy.’

‘Well, s’pose I ain’t doin’ any harm walking with yer?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

Gifford walked so quickly that Forby was forced to trot to keep up with him; but as he trotted Forby talked, though almost breathlessly.

‘Y’ mightn’t’ (puff) ‘get any opposishun this nex’ time if yer drop that there’ (puff) ‘land tax.’

‘I wouldn’t drop it if I could,’ replied Gifford.

‘Well, even if yer didn’t I might ’old opposishun off yer.’ He glanced slyly to see the effect of his words, but there was no change of expression on Gifford’s half-averted face. ‘Y’ see, I’m the chairman o’ the Deformed League at Korringajork, an’ what I say everybody does.’

‘I’m not afraid of opposition, Mr. Forby.’

The independence-loving Mr. Forby damned this independence of Gifford, because it carried an implied disregard of Forby and his works; but he was silent as they turned into Swanston Street, and did not speak again until the Town Hall was reached.

Then he spoke with the air of a man who knows that he is offering terms that must be accepted.

‘Well, you’ll ’ave no opposishun if you promise to increase the Government subsidy to the municerpalities.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Well, we want a lot o’ road-mendin’ done.’

‘Then increase your municipal rates.’

At this terrible proposal that the Victorian yeoman—his country’s curse—should tax himself Forby almost fainted, but compromised by gasping at the blasphemy.

‘Why, look ’ere, Mr. Gifford—’

But at that moment Gifford saw in the moving crowd, making it look inexpressibly sordid and mean by comparison, the figure of Australia Field, graceful as a palm.

She bowed to him, and he returned the salute and tried to go to her, but Forby had buttonholed him.

'Y' see, if y' talk like that ye're bound t' 'ave opposishun.'

'Another time! another time! I must go.'

'But I'm goin' 'ome ter-morrow, an' we want ter fix up at once whether we're goin' t' run a man agen yer or no, yer see.'

Miss Field had passed them. Gifford turned and saw her disappearing in the crowd. He wanted so much to speak with her again that he wrenched his coat from Forby's detaining fingers and cursed Forby, whereat that political power became livid with rage, and determined that Gifford should have the most virulent opposition that Korrington could produce.

But Gifford, caring not a straw for Korrington at the moment, made his way to where he had last seen Miss Field, but failed to find her, and stood on the kerb cursing Forby and hot with disappointment.

Love at first sight is possible only when the heart is clean and young—not because there are yet illusions to be lost, but because there is soil, not rock and ashes. And Gifford was comparatively clean and wholly young, and Stralio absolutely both.

Seeing her again, Gifford felt that he knew all Dante's obsession by Beatrice, though he was too human to understand the love that was content to worship from afar, or to brook the losing of her to another man. And now he had lost an opportunity.

'Damn Forby!' said Gifford.

'He might have spoken to me,' said Stralio.

CHAPTER XIII

‘It is an old, old story,
Yet bideth ever new,
And he to whom it chanceth
It breaks his heart in two.’

LUCK made them meet often after that vain encounter in the city, and their embarrassments at these meetings were subtle compliments each to each.

The triumvirate was in danger of death by secession : Daven’s love affair separated him from his mates ; Gifford and Abbey were drifting from friendship into being merely acquaintances. All the tastes and kindnesses and memories that tied them to each other were for the time forgotten ; the old loves of track and camp, flood and fire, and of mutual endurance, gain and loss, disappeared from Gifford’s memory in the new and enthralling pursuit of *The Woman* ; and Stralie was Abbey’s one jealousy—a jealousy quiet but very deep, for this phlegmatic man had never loved before, and his repulses only strengthened his stubbornness.

When Abbey and Gifford met, it was with an embarrassment that made the parting a relief. There must have been two men in Eden, because a woman was there ; Cain was not the first murderer. Abbey, who had been such a stanch friend, lost not a jot of his admiration for Gifford : that was too deep to be

affected; but when he found Stralie and Gifford together in his thoughts he forgot that friendship of three which had made their early manhood a golden age—which had, until a few months ago, gilded the struggles and the hardnances of such camps as Sudden Jerk and Blazing Glory, the Peak, New Paris, and Sandy Blight, beyond their unalluring names and merits.

Even Mrs. Hempel's optimism could not save Abbey's faintheartedness. While there had been no apparently favoured suitor in the field, he had hoped; now that circumstances seemed to be devoted to Gifford, the thrice-rejected lover despaired of ever moving her. Yet in all their frequent meetings Stralie had not favoured Gifford over other men. Whatever may have been her real feelings, her pride saved her from any exposure of them. Pride ruled her so much that she was proud of her pride; and if Mrs. Hempel and Stralie's mother shook their heads smilingly, and prophesied a sudden, complete, and Griselda-like surrender 'one of these days,' the confidence of youth that admits no precedents, not even the precedent of death, kept unshaken her own belief in herself.

She met Gifford often—at his mother's house, at her own home, and at Mrs. Hempel's—and talked with him and admitted to herself all her interest in, and admiration of his qualities, without admitting even a suspicion of loving him. Yet, always on her guard against him, she failed to guard herself against nature, the which can never be denied.

Gifford had called on Mrs. Field, who in a moment yielded to his fascinations, making him so welcome a guest that he visited almost as frequently as Abbey, who was Stralie's second shadow whenever opportunity offered. Generally the four people constituted

themselves a conversation of two—Gifford and Mrs. Field talking, Stralie listening and putting in a word now and then, and Abbey regarding the whole arrangement with a half-sulky jealousy.

Within a fortnight of his introduction to Mrs. Field, Gifford discovered that the seaside in autumn did not suit his mother's health, and although that lady's love bred jealous suspicions, she said naught, and agreed with a good grace to take a house near Mrs. Field's—a removal which gave Abbey new fears when he thought he had exhausted them all.

Stralie knew only that she had a subtle pleasure in Gifford's company, but Gifford was in no doubt. He knew, with his usual lightning decisiveness, that she was the one woman for him, and no faintness of heart dictated a delay in approaching her: he waited only for an opportunity; but there was always Mrs. Field, or Mrs. Hempel, or his mother, or Abbey, in the way. Therefore he appeared to devote himself to Mrs. Field when all his desires were to Stralie; so that Mrs. Hempel, who examined facts too closely to see them quite truly, set him down as one of those pack-horses which are content to carry wine and drink water.

Gifford called one afternoon, and found Abbey in attendance. They greeted each other like armed men, each waiting for the other to make the insult or draw the sword, but Abbey the more bitter of the two, for he felt that the victory was to his one-time mate.

Stralie entered the room dressed for walking.

'We are going to Mrs. Hempel's, Mr. Gifford,' she said, as they shook hands.

Abbey's face grew sunny at the 'we.'

'May I go with you?'

'I think so; Mrs. Hempel will be glad to see you.'

Abbey's face clouded again.

They walked down the grassed road together in uneasy silence, broken by converse merely monosyllabic—Abbey sulky and therefore most at a disadvantage, Gifford anxious to please, and Stralie embarrassed. Suddenly the narrow road was filled with uproar: a dogcart, drawn by a mad and bolting horse, and occupied by a girl, white-faced and paralyzed by terror, dashed towards them at a gallop.

Abbey was nearest the fence, and Stralie's most feasible escape lay in his direction; yet nature found her. As the horse approached them, she ran towards the danger—and Gifford, clasped his arm, shrank to the shelter of his shoulder, and cried in great alarm: 'Oh, oh!'

Gifford put a protecting arm around her as Abbey left them, raced with the horse for twenty yards, and pulled him to a break, a trot, a rear, and a standstill. He recovered the reins for the girl, and handed them to the half-exhausted man, who ran to them in tardy rescue, accepted their breathless thanks without half hearing them, and returned to Gifford and Stralie. But less than the usual prize of the martyr, which is momentary applause, was his; so occupied were the two with each other that they scarcely noticed him. That light resting for a moment on Gifford's shoulder had found Stralie's affections for her. The three walked to Mrs. Hempel's house even more silent than before.

And at night, when Gifford and Abbey and Mrs. Hempel accompanied Stralie home, all Mrs. Hempel's plans for Abbey were disappointed by circumstance.

Abbey found himself walking ahead with Mrs. Hempel; Gifford and Stralie, paired as by natural selection, loitered at first a hundred feet and at last a

quarter of a mile, behind them. Her beauty lighted the darkness for Gifford ; her eyes shone like stars ; she was as tenacious of impressions as sculptor's clay. The very few words necessary were spoken ; the first kiss followed without conscious will and as by instinct.

'Don't go in yet, dearest.'

'Oh, I must ! They'll wonder where we are.'

'To-morrow, then ?'

'Yes, to-morrow afternoon.'

'No, the morning.'

'Not the morning.'

'Yes, at daybreak.'

'At daybreak ?'

'Daybreak—yes. We'll go down by the river again. There's such a lot to talk about.'

'I suppose I must.'

'Yes, you must, if you love me.'

'To-morrow, then.'

'To-morrow. I shan't sleep a minute.'

'But you must ; you might make yourself ill.'

Gifford laughed, as at a memory of strength given to many careless nights and days—strength that could never be weakened.

'Then I'll try to sleep. I won't go in now.'

'No, don't come in. I'll say you had to go home—shall I ?'

'Anything. Till to-morrow.'

'To-morrow.'

'God bless you, sweetheart !'

'And God bless you and keep you safe !'

'To-morrow.'

The winding garden-path hid her goddess shape from him ; the happy lover looked at the stars, laughed, and strode away exultant.

CHAPTER XIV

‘And now above them pours a wondrous voice,
Such as Greek reapers heard in Sicily.’

THE haze of the early autumn morning still hid the river, although it had lifted from the far-off city roofs, and every distant factory-stack showed its broken feather of smoke struggling in the gray-blue air, when Stralie, fresh as Monna Vanna, ran down the veranda steps and flushed a little as she saw her night-old lover.

‘Have you been waiting long, Mr. Gifford?’

But he did not answer her thus distantly. It was not his way to come into his kingdom a few hours ago, and now to show any doubt of his ownership.

‘I’ve been waiting here since daybreak, dear, and I’ve been awake all night.’

She flushed again, and extended her hand, but he came closer and kissed her.

‘Oh, please—somebody might be looking.’

‘There isn’t, sweetheart. Look for yourself; there’s not a soul on the road.’

‘Which way shall we go, then?’

‘That way—down to the river; the other way leads to the asylum.’

She laughed nervously.

'Well, people would say you are mad—awake all night and then standing at my garden-gate before sunrise.'

'I am mad, Stralie. If I were sane now I'd be a miserable clod. But it is a wise madness. The world is ours, dear.'

Her face was full of pride as her eyes of love, but it was a new pride—pride of her lover, whose every word had romance in it, and made this grassy road an enchanted plain.

'May told me that you gave a charm to the commonplace, Mr. Giff—'

'Are you speaking to me, Stralie?'

'Yes.'

'My name's George.'

'Well, May said that—George.'

'You mean Mrs. Hempel?'

'Yes.'

'When did she say that, sweetheart?'

'Oh, never mind.'

'But I do mind. When was it?'

'Oh, last night.'

'After—'

'Yes, after that.'

'So you found time to tell her and not time to tell your mother?'

'I did tell my mother. I told her first.'

'At that rate, you couldn't have left Mrs. Hempel before two o'clock this morning.'

'I did! I left her at half-past one.'

'Then you didn't sleep all night either?'

'Oh, you mustn't ask me that. Let me keep something to myself.'

‘I can’t, Stralie. You must be all mine—thought, word, and deed.’

‘So I shall be. Do you think I could love you if I couldn’t be everything?’

‘Yes, but the past, too.’

‘There’s no past, George.’

‘We’ve got to hear it all, anyhow: what you did, and how you grew, and when you began to love me.’

‘But you wouldn’t care to hear all that,’ she said uneasily, the last soldier of her pride retreating to the last ditch, the last defender of the citadel of identity dying on the tower.

‘I would, dear. Wouldn’t you like to hear how I have loved you since our first walk together?’

‘Oh yes; that would be different.’

‘That is to say, you love me more than I love you.’

‘Oh, I hope not—I hope not. That would be terrible!’

‘Well, then, when did you?’

‘I don’t know. Women can’t remember their emotions as men do. I think women love more with the heart, men more with the brain.’

‘That is to say, a woman can love a man she doesn’t respect, but a man can’t love a woman unless he respects her.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Don’t ask me. I can’t argue or find any reasons. It only seemed to me that you knew when you began to love me, and I couldn’t remember when I began to love you.’

‘When were you sure you loved me?’

She flushed again, and a look of tenderness and affright came into her eyes.

‘Must I say, George?’

‘Yes; I command you.’

He laughed as he said it, but she was glad to take it literally. She felt all the sweets of that submission which is a woman’s conquest as she replied :

‘Last night, George.’

He looked about, and seeing none, drew her close and kissed her, and half-involuntarily she returned the kiss, but so lightly that she only seemed to.

As they left the road and entered the park that dips so steeply to the river, then white and smoky from the haze of last night’s frost, the sun rose higher and tore the mist away.

They found a seat on a prone eucalypt, and Gifford drew her to his arms, and she, looking about frightenedly saw only a yellow-beaked bird with his head aside regarding them with a comic interest, and dismissing any anxiety for the little witness, she suffered the embrace and made no movement of objection when he kissed her and laid her head upon his shoulder. She was too noble to show ordinary feminine coquetry. And as she rested there, and he talked, kissing her at the end of every sentence, she thought of her vaunted pride, of the prophecies by her mother and Mrs. Hempel of the ‘Mr. Right’ who would come to conquer her, and was glad that ‘Mr. Right’ had come and now held her in his arms. She knew that had she been weak enough to submit to be worn down by Abbey’s continued importunities, Abbey would have been her slave and she the despot; for she was the true natural woman who enjoys having her own way only with the husband she does not love. As in a flash she saw—after that night of marvel that told her that from hence she was to live indeed—that the woman who remains her own mistress is the woman

without a lover; she is her own mistress, but never a mistress to any but herself.

He talked like an angel, for he was greatly in love, and all his qualities and his experiences and half-forgotten memories were made evident, to help him teach love to the beloved. All he had read or learned by work and living returned to him, and Stralie listened fascinatedly; paying him his wage of an occasional glance from eyes full of magic; her love of him, her pride in him, growing from the tender plant of last night, without limit, as if it would fill the earth.

She had always been religious, although it had never had the brand of any church, so for her there could never be any half-hearted conviction; in this newborn love, that was growing into boundless adoration under the fascination of the beloved voice, expressing the beloved mind, she suddenly and without knowledge made her love her religion. There had always been the temple, and now she built the shrine.

The natural park became flooded with light; every tree-bole had its foraging bird; the river lay green and yellow in the sunlight.

‘Isn’t the world beautiful, George?’

‘“And all that therein is.”’

‘Were you thinking of Bible talk then?’

‘Yes, sweetheart.’

‘And so was I—the same thought as yours.’

‘A proof that we belong.’

‘I want no proofs, George.’

‘Nor I. The head on the shoulder is the best proof. Put it down again.’

‘Will that do?’

‘It’s perfect. What Bible talk were you thinking of?’

‘Just when the sun showed us the river I thought I had never seen a day so bright before.’

‘I know. It seems to us to be brighter than summer.’

‘Only to us?’

‘To a few other lovers, possibly. But most of the Poor Little People are at work, and they can’t see it as we do.’

‘Everybody ought to be in love, George.’

‘Well, you order it, Empress, and it shall be so. But what was the quotation?’

‘“They need no light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light.”’

‘Lord God Eros.’

‘Isn’t that irreverent, George?’

‘It would be blasphemous if I said I knew of any other god or goddess than yourself, sweetheart.’

‘Don’t crush my hat, George. . . . Did I misquote?’

‘Whether you did or not, it’s a misquotation no longer. It’s our revised version from this day, and we’ll order a new edition to be printed if you like.’

‘I hope we shall always love one another, George.’

‘No necessity for hoping anything, Stralie. It is done. We do love for ever.’

‘But we’re both extremists.’

‘The other kind of love is no good, Stralie. Let us stay extreme.’

They walked back to Stralie’s house, both faces made doubly beautiful by happiness, the man and the woman so much in love with each other that they loved the whole world; and everything that lived that day they gilded with glances of affection, and each other most of all.

In the days that followed — Gifford having been accepted as the New Man of the House by Stralie's mother, and Mrs. Gifford having in return accepted Stralie after some secret fears and twinges of jealousy, finally alleviated by the facts that marriage would force settled habits on George, and that the marriage of a son is, after all, not so terrible as the marriage of a daughter — the two most important personages lived not of earth, although in it. Abbey had heard the news, and retired sullenly without seeing Stralie, and with a more marked avoidance of his old mate; and Mrs. Hempel, now that Abbey's dismissal had been made absolute, accepted the new king, like the courtier she was. She even welcomed Gifford with advice.

'Mr. Gifford,' she said, noting that his worshipping eyes followed the beauty as she moved, 'you mustn't spoil Stralie.'

'She's an angel, Mrs. Hempel; she can't be spoiled.'

'Anybody can be spoiled; but, of course, it would be difficult to spoil her. Her mother's just the same — an angel of a woman.'

'She's very like my mother.'

Mrs. Hempel knitted her joined eyebrows and searched him with a swift glance.

'This man is a good man.' Then, aloud: 'You see, the father was a very selfish man — spent his money on himself, and so the mother and the daughter were never spoiled by having too much money.'

'He was a bad lot, I believe.'

'All the better for them. A spendthrift's children ought to be glad of their father's meanness.'

'But all the money in the world couldn't spoil Stralie.'

‘It might have made her selfish. As it is, she hasn’t a fault.’

‘I know she hasn’t.’

‘You can’t call pride a fault.’

‘I don’t think pride is the right word. That self-respect that Stralie has is just the same as courage in a man.’

Mrs. Hempel laughed.

‘I see it’s hopeless for me to criticise her ; you won’t see a fault in your idol.’

‘There isn’t one to see.’

‘Oh, you perfect lover ! You don’t belong to the nineteenth century. . . . Now, don’t tell her we were talking about her. . . . Take him away, Stralie. I told him it was bad taste to talk religion, but he’s so bigoted he insisted on it.’

‘Religion ?’ repeated Stralie, looking at him, puzzled.

‘Were you talking religion, George ?’

‘Yes,’ said Gifford, looking into her eyes.

CHAPTER XV

‘My one friend! my only—all my own—
Who put his breast between the spears and me.’

‘I’VE come to say good-bye, Miss Field.’

‘Are you leaving Melbourne, Mr. Abbey?’

‘Yes—business—Coocooroo. Leaving to-morrow,’ he replied jerkily, embarrassed by her beauty and made incoherent by the disappointment of her engagement to Gifford.

‘You’ll see Mr. Hempel, then?’

‘Yes—he’s an old friend of mine.’

‘Will you give him my kindest wishes?’

‘I shall be glad.’

And that was the end of the conventionalities, because by this time the feeling of the absolute loss of her left only room in him for naturalness.

‘Stralie, I suppose if I were a good man I should congratulate you, but I can’t.’

‘Mr. Gifford is a good man, Mr. Abbey.’

‘I know—none better. He was my mate for five years. Until he knew you he was my friend.’

‘He is your friend still. He speaks always affectionately of you. He calls you “good old Frank,” just as he speaks of Mr. Daven as “dear old Jack.”’

‘He can afford to be my friend, because he has you. He can afford to be the friend of all the world.’

‘ You must see him before you leave.’

‘ Must I ?’

‘ Yes, and take his hand, and be the good mates you always were. Is a little accident like myself to break up a tried friendship ? I’d never forgive myself—I’d never be quite happy if I caused that.’

‘ Then if that is so I’ll see him, and I’ll say good-bye now.’

‘ Good-bye, Frank.’

‘ Good-bye, Stralie.’

Their hands parted, and the rejected went down the garden walk, and inevitably met Gifford at the gate ; for Gifford was always at Mrs. Field’s house, except when asleep, or walking with Stralie. They met in the early morning and parted at breakfast-time, and met again in the afternoon, and again at night, and parted then as if parting were death.

His followers grumbled a little at his half-defection, and were conciliated by Daven, who had married Miss Marsh and understood that love knows no politics.

‘ He can’t help it,’ said Daven. ‘ I’ll speak to him, of course ; but he’s an extremist, and we’ve got to take him so.’

Graham, the misogynist, grinned.

‘ I’ll bet his girl thinks his extremeness is the finest of all the virtues ; but he won’t look at work since he’s been engaged to her.’

‘ Can’t blame him much,’ said Daven ; ‘ but I’ll speak to him.’

‘ It won’t do much good, Jack. Women are not for men of action, although the men of action pretended to be women-hunters from mere vanity, and fear that their manhood should be discounted by any rumours of cold-

ness. A good lover is a great loafer. While Giff is in love we'll never get a stroke of work from him.'

'Then he'll never work again, for it looks as if he's playing for keeps.'

This ideal lover, to do him justice, simply had no time for any but the business in hand—no time for work, for constituents, for his party, for the old intimate talks with his mother—who most keenly felt the change and shed a few secret tears therefor—or for his friends.

All the qualities which had made an adventurer of him—the persistence which had carried him through many a tight place, the dependability and the obvious strength which had always put him in the van and made him leader—were now concentrated on the task of conciliating and holding the sweet city he had won.

She never really settled down to the calm possession of him, because he was full of surprises—mercurial gaiety changing to fiery earnestness, a swift impressionability altering his thought and word in an instant; as quick as her own intuition, so that his speech changed to anything she liked almost before she knew it, his courtly reverence replaced in a moment by an audacity that won while it frightened. If she forgot him for a moment in his absence, he had always emissaries for her reminding—books, music, flowers, and those swift memories of such a personality which make the rememberer smile quietly. His mere initiative in sending or causing these she unconsciously regarded with a lover's egotism as his invention—as if there had never been man, woman, flower, or music in the world until she and Gifford had met and loved.

As Abbey moodily walked to the road he met the

successful one, conquest writ large in his eyes, the step of the master in his stride. Abbey looked at the flowers in Gifford's hand, and was sulky again.

'How are you, Frank?'

'I'm all right.'

He accepted the proffered hand and shook it limply.

'How are things?'

'Coocooroos a shade weaker. I'm going up there.'

'Are you? Business?'

'Yes,' replied the other, knowing he was lying.

'Hope you will be successful,' said Gifford, knowing that Abbey was lying, and mainly desired to put distance between him and Stralie.

'Thanks. I'll clear now. Good-bye.'

Gifford caught his hand in the old grip.

'Good-bye, Frank, and good luck! We were always good mates.'

Abbey did not return the pressure. He said sullenly, 'Good-bye,' drew his hand away, and walked down the road, the poor sulky yellow crest a few inches lower than when that head held pride and the heart had hope.

Gifford was cast down for a moment, and sorry for half an hour. He was the winner, and, as the winner, could afford the generosity of regret.

'Poor old Frank!' he said later, when Stralie walked with him under the trees that knew no seasons except spring and another.

'I'm sorry I came between you,' replied Stralie, slightly piqued.

'My beauty, I didn't mean that! So far as you are concerned, I'm glad he's "poor old Frank," but I'm sorry he should forget we were once good mates.'

‘He doesn’t forget that, dear. Give him a little time and he’ll see it was inevitable, and be friendly again.’

‘Then let us make it inevitable immediately, sweetheart.’

‘How?’ said she, opening her eyes widely, but understanding him very well.

‘By marrying at once.’

‘But—we are quite happy as we are.’

‘We’ll be more than “quite happy” when we’re married.’

‘But why are you not satisfied, George? You know I’m yours and I know you are mine, and isn’t that enough?’

She made this ostrich-like attempt at concealment of the obvious with a charming air of innocence, but Gifford would not allow her to retain the pretension.

‘You know it isn’t enough, dear. And as you love me——’

‘When did I say so?’

‘You said it just now.’

‘I didn’t. I said you belonged to me.’

‘That’s the same thing.’

‘I never said outright that I loved you.’

‘Not once in those words, but a thousand times by suggestion. And you do, don’t you?’

‘Oh, well—yes.’

‘Then, when is it to be?’

‘Oh, do not ask me for a day! Say six months.’

‘No, one month.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t! You’re unreasonable.’

‘Well, six weeks.’

‘No, George. Give mother a little time longer with me, dear. Say two months.’

‘It’s a bargain, Mrs. Gifford, and I’ll seal it.’

‘Mind, mind! the cook is looking.’

‘Good luck to the cook’s eyesight, then!’

‘George, you tell mother; I can’t bear to. She looks at me often since our engagement as if she would cry.’

‘So does mine. But, dear, we can’t wait all our good time for them. We’d begin to lose all affection for them if they were to stand between us.’

‘I suppose we would; but it seems to me to be selfish to leave them.’

‘It’s natural we should, and most natural impulses are selfish, Stralie.’

‘You’ll be a preacher in your old age, George.’

‘The penalty for an insult is severe put pleasant,’ said Gifford. ‘No hurry now; serve you sentence with resignation.’

Stralie accepted the punishment with a resignation that bore a curious resemblance to rapture.

CHAPTER XVI

‘Love makes time pass away ; time makes love pass away.’

ONCE the marriage was fixed and the coronation day of happiness within sight, Gifford drifted a little into his old ways of action, so that his party prophesied fair things for him, and the Government was correspondingly uneasy. Daven, his first lieutenant, and Graham, his second, were full of hope for their chief and themselves. Berkshire, who occasionally gasped a speech to the glory of money, and Millenet, the maniac of figures, watched the continuously growing popularity of the new party with a badly-concealed anxiety—Berkshire, because the Toryism that was inherent in him appeared in danger ; Millenet, because the new party had an outspoken contempt for precedent where a principle was at stake, so threatening to cripple ‘formula,’ which was Millenet’s breath of life.

Gifford had said once in defending a political organization that helped him, and condemning a sectarianism that had helped the failures of the Parliament into their position as members: ‘It is a greater crime to cut a man’s nails in the name of religion than it is to hang him in the name of political expedience’ ; and the horror of such an iconoclast became their fixed idea.

The awful Legislative Council, which pretended to

be mildly democratic, but was really more conservative and almost as permanent as the English House of Lords, echoed the fear of the reactionaries in the Assembly. The Council was a dead House, that occupied spasmodic session mostly in adjournments, after stating in apoplectic voices that it—the Council—was the only real friend of the people, and that all others were pretenders and gross imitations.

From these councillors Gifford knew he could expect only continuous obstruction, and the knowledge of that kept a few wavering members behind the Government and so held power away from Gifford.

Stralie came there often, and from the Speaker's Gallery drank in the statements of *her* Leader of the Opposition with the blind faith of an epileptic hermit in a Divine revelation ; for him she became more greedy of power than he.

Every day brought him to her cottage, so that Stralie's mother, who had first endured this thief of daughters, began to watch for his coming, and finally accepted him as a son, as she had renewed her girlhood's friendship with his mother and made of her a sister and a gossip ; for they were both done with life and knew it all, and so had no need of confidants, having no doubt of anything.

The wedding-day was but a fortnight distant when Stralie, returning with Gifford from the afternoon walk, found the household in confusion and her mother dead. Then Gifford found himself shelved for the time ; without thinking of it, to agree to being comforted by the lover seemed to her a slight to the mother, as if the sorrow of the bereaved were the right of the dead, and the dead jealous of its right.

Gifford knew her well, and effaced himself so easily that first she felt grateful to him, and then wanted him for the comfort she had regarded as undutiful. But the first burst of grief over, and the clay consolidating on the new grave under the driving rain, he came to be readmitted to the old place, and to propose, with a feeling of conscious magnanimity and abnegation, that the wedding should be deferred for six weeks. To that Stralie cried :

‘Oh, I couldn’t think of it! How can you propose such a thing?’

‘But you love me, dear?’

‘Well, even then. My poor mother! . . . Oh, don’t ask me, George!’

‘Say two months, then?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t! Poor mother has been dead only a fortnight. It would look like forgetting her.’

‘What does it matter what it *looks* like, sweetheart, when you know you don’t forget her and never will?’

‘But to be happy when poor mother is only dead a little time—it wouldn’t be decent.’

‘Stralie, you mustn’t make a luxury of sorrow.’

‘I don’t. You can’t understand. I would look on myself as horribly selfish if I came to you for a long time yet. I wouldn’t be happy with you, either. My conscience wouldn’t let me.’

‘Stralie, this is foolish.’

‘Thank you. To call my grief for my mother foolish! I never thought I’d hear you say that.’

‘You know very well that you haven’t heard me say it, don’t you?’

‘Y—yes, I know. I was cruel to say that. But—oh, George! she did all for me, gave up her life to

me! Can't I defer my happiness for even a little for her?'

'I'll say no more, sweetheart, but it's hard. And how long am I to wait?'

'Six months, George.'

'Six months?'

'Yes, dear. May and I have talked it all over. She is going up to Coocooroo to her husband, and I'm to go with her, and we'll both come back before the rains——'

'There haven't been any rains for three years, Stralie. Suppose the drought lasts another three years?'

'Well, I don't mean that. I mean before the summer.'

'And when do you go, sweetheart?'

'Next week. And when I come back, George, I'll come to you gladly, dear, and we'll love each other all our lives.'

'But six months!'

'It won't last long, dear, and you'll work better with me away; and you must make yourself Premier before I come back, so that I may be prouder of you and love you all the more.'

Her voice trembled, and her eyes were tear-filled. They kissed silently.

'You're right, Stralie—you always are right; and I'll send you a letter every day.'

'And I'll write every week, George. There's only one post a week, you know.'

'And if there's an early recess I might be able to come to Coocooroo.'

'Wouldn't that be splendid, George!'

They heartened each other up in this way, advancing improbabilities to the rank of proved facts; but he,

more than she, believed in the shortening of the probation she invented for his comfort. Comfort for herself she did not greatly desire, for she had her grief. The narcotic of sorrow, like the intoxication of joy, fills life while it lasts.

During the last week together he might have broken her resolution with his old habit of domination, but this master passion had changed his ways, for the time at least, as much as it had permanently affected her life. He found himself, as their engagement had lengthened, strangely changed in his attitude to her, although to all others he was the old Gifford. So far as concerned her, all his old habits of taking by storm had been attenuated into a semi-diffidence, made gentle by love, as Stralie had been changed from pride. So he accepted the separation, and saw her depart in tears, and returned to his mother and his work numb with the new sense of something essential lost, but questioning never her judgment, nor attempting to analyze her sense of duty to the dead. Thus he never discovered that that sense of duty was partly respect for appearances; partly of genuinely, all-absorbing love of the mother, who had been father and mother to her; partly a selfishness to the lover, to whom her most obvious duty pointed as decisively as did her inclination.

CHAPTER XVII

‘A woman who loves to be at the window is like a bunch of grapes on the wayside.’

A MONTH of work, a month of loneliness, settled Gifford to the new conditions that had at first seemed impossible of endurance. The Tory alarms of Berkshire and the statistical excursions of Millenet showed more plainly the fear of the growing strength of Gifford’s party.

In the beginning Gifford had no amusements, but after the first few weeks, by a series of accidents, which later appeared to be the circumstances of a design, he met Mrs. Millenet at every turn—at the House, at the theatres, at certain semi-society functions which in his official capacity he might naturally be expected to attend, and finally in a tea-room, where he might not have been expected, and which he visited by reason of a teetotal constituent insisting on that feminine refreshment.

As he rose to leave she crossed to him, and her tall gracious presence affrighted the unsophisticated country elector, so that he bade his representative good-bye in an agony of distress and left the politician to the enemy.

She was still radiant as when they had first met in midsummer, and the season was now late winter; still

cool, but yet not cold, as if neither heat nor frost could affect her blood.

'Oh, Mr. Gifford, I haven't seen you for an age!' Their last meeting was three days old. 'I've been with a party of old frumps, and as soon as I saw you come in I thought, "Mr. Gifford has been sent to rescue me."'

'Was the danger great?' he asked, regarding this cool, trivial creature smilingly, because in the first place she had saved him from the constituent, and in the second her presence promised to save him from his loneliness.

'Terrible! They would have talked me to death!'

'Are you going to the train?'

'Yes. You'll take me to the station, won't you?'

'Of course.'

'Now, isn't that "of course" sweet of you?—as if you couldn't do anything but take me to the station, even if the heavens fell.'

She gabbled and he listened during the walk to the station, and, arrived there, she suddenly stopped, faced him, and said:

'You're the most entertaining man I've ever met.'

'But I've spoken scarcely a word,' said Gifford, in surprised and smiling protest.

'It doesn't matter. I understood you so well when I found how well you listened. . . . Now, don't try to analyze that. I hardly know what I mean.'

'If you ask me not, I won't try.'

'I know you understand me perfectly. Henry doesn't.' She looked away petulantly for a moment. 'You'll come and see me, won't you? I'll be at home every afternoon—mostly——' She added very softly 'To you.'

‘Thank you. I shall be glad to call.’

The locomotive whistle shrieked, and their hands clasped.

‘Mind, you promised—to-morrow.’

‘Yes, to-morrow. Good-bye.’

The train had steamed out of the station before he remembered that he had not promised any visit for any day.

‘She must have misunderstood me,’ said the blinkard; ‘but I’ll have to go.’

CHAPTER XVIII

‘The cock shuts his eyes when he crows, because he knows the song by heart.’

DR. GRAHAM noted the frequent, though unplanned, meetings of Gifford and Mrs. Millenet, and he did not scruple in his brusquely kindly way to let his friend know of his estimate of the end.

‘Look here, Giff, this is going too far; you must drop it.’

‘Drop what?’

‘Mrs. Millenet.’

Gifford received the advice with an unwonted stiffness of demeanour.

‘What right have you to use a lady’s name in that way, Graham?’

‘The right of any man who objects to seeing any lady make a hash of his friend’s life.’

‘My dear old chap, you take too serious a view of it. There is absolutely no danger.’

‘Not from you, but from her.’

‘She’s a good woman. Her husband doesn’t seem to mind our friendship. He trusts both of us.’

‘Oh! He hasn’t enough jealousy to be suspicious, nor enough blood to be jealous. He’d trust a dog with a pound of butter.’

‘Don’t be brutal, old man.’

‘Well, what’s the attraction if it isn’t the usual one? And what’s the end to be if not the usual one?’

‘There won’t be any end, and the attraction is merely sympathy.’

‘Oh! She wants sympathy, does she?’

‘Everybody does.’

‘And a childless woman most of all. Always wanting—never satisfied. Old Solly the Jew was right: “The grave and——”’

‘Graham, this isn’t decent. I don’t like to think——’

‘Giff, if I am brutal and truthful, you’re hypocritical and polite.’

‘At any rate, I’m doing no harm. We are merely friends. Mrs. Millenet is lonely, and so am I.’

‘You’ve your friends, your work, and the letters from the girl! Good God, man! if you want to do something as a protest against dulness go and get decently drunk and save your soul alive.’

‘Good old Graham! now, where’s the fear? Mrs. Millenet is a lady.’

‘I’d be easier in my mind if she were a gentleman.’

‘She’s lonely, old man. Her life is very dreary.’

‘“He cometh not,” she said. Has she told you she’s misunderstood yet?’

‘Why, how did you know?’

‘How does anybody know? Of course she said she was misunderstood, and turned her head like that, and stared into the bitter, irrevocable past—didn’t she?’

‘How the devil——?’

‘Of course she did! And then you squeezed her hand in sympathy, and said that *you* understood her.’

‘Where were you?’

‘I wasn’t there, but I know that sort of woman always does that sort of thing. Didn’t you say you understood her?’

‘Yes, I said that once.’

‘Tell a woman anything flattering once, and the devil will tell it her a hundred times before you see her again.’

‘I’m sure she hasn’t given me a thought since.’

‘Why are you sure? Because you haven’t given a thought to her?’

Gifford flushed and attempted denial.

‘I——’

‘Of course you’ve given her a thought. Yet you’re in love with the best girl on earth. And if you think of this flopping, melting woman because you’re lonely through love of your girl, how much more does the flopping woman think of you? She hasn’t even work to do—only to contemplate her imaginary woes.’

‘The’re not quite imaginary.’

‘I agree with you a little. That husband of hers isn’t a man; he’s a damned fifth proposition. But don’t mind him—drop her.’

‘There’s not the slightest danger; she’s a good woman.’

‘The only woman who is good is the one who can sit close to the fire and not burn. And there’s only one thing would make a good woman of Mrs. Millenet. No lazy woman can be quite virtuous. If Mrs. Millenet were left a widow to-morrow without a penny, and had to put in eight hours a day at a wash-tub, she would be a saint by the time she had worn her fingers half-way to the bone.’

Gifford turned away impatiently.

‘We’re too good friends to quarrel, Doc., but I’ll have to go while I’m peaceable.’

‘Go to the devil, you lunatic! or’—his voice softened strangely—‘tell me you’ll leave her alone and come to lunch.’

‘I won’t be dictated to by anybody,’ said Gifford savagely, and walked off.

‘Only by your own foolish impulses; you don’t mind being a slave to them,’ the doctor called after him; but he strode on unheeding, and Graham, his displeasure abating rapidly, watched him pass up Collins Street under the plane-trees, which were beginning to be sore at their bud-points and ready to break into the green flames of spring.

CHAPTER XIX

'I have no bad motive,' said the Tertium Quid ; 'I do but visit the lady to find if it be a fine day to-morrow.'

'GIFF, it's a big mistake. You must drop Mrs. Millenet.'

'Now, don't you bother about it too, Jack. There's no harm in her, and I can look after myself.'

'Can you look after her husband too?'

'He! Why, life's only statistics to him. He can't see anything but formula.'

'He can see you; and lately he's taken to look at you from that corner bench-seat of his. Whenever you speak or move his beastly little eyes follow you like a crab's—simply sickening.'

'Don't you worry, Jack. Anybody might hear all I say.'

'I know—I know you mean well; but you risk your girl, and you risk your party.'

'It's all right—it's all right,' said Gifford, soothing him like a mother her weary child. And with this assurance Daven was fain to be content.

Gifford's love-hunger was not to be sated by the husks of political success. He was not superficial enough, or could not so appear, to be popular. Yet now that the biggest prize seemed to be within grasp, all sorts of people, who had before played the Levite

and passed by on the other side, began to display an affectionate interest in him. Within a few days of his conversation with Daven the sense of loneliness, that Stralie's absence always produced whenever he rested for a moment and lost the obsession of his work, became so overpowering that, half without design, he crossed the river and walked again through the gardens to South Yarra. The bleakness of early spring was in the air; the searching gales had blown scentless the early violets and narcissi.

He found Mrs. Millenet protected against the seasonable coldness by an exaggerated fluffiness in her house furnishings, as well as in her clothing. It was a house of moss on a foundation of chiffon. The fire-heat was tempered by a rosy screen; the weakly spring sun banished by curtains that gave the room a cathedral light only.

Mrs. Millenet came forward to receive him, dabbing her eyes with an airy fabric softer than the tears it absorbed, her tall thin figure looking taller by reason of the dress she wore—black, soft, ethereal, and entrained.

She offered him her hand, turning her face towards her left shoulder as she did; hoped he was well; sniffed a little; dabbed her eyes again; released his hand; asked him to sit down. More sniff, more dab, more averted face, a sigh, a graceful declination, and lo! she was herself seated, her right hand on the chair arm, and supporting her chin; her left hand gracefully settled by her knee, and holding the airy handkerchief, and drooping like a stricken lily; her gaze fixed upon the fire, whose arrested rays softened all the theatricality of herself and her surroundings. The waxen

lids fell over the violet eyes; her throat worked as if she had lost the child of her womb that day. She was the tragedy of disillusionment, the first cloud of the melodramatic honeymoon—love's sorrow incarnate.

She dabbed her eyes again, and said:

'I did not see you at Mrs. Grey's concert, Mr. Gifford.'

'No. I have been too busy, and I am very sorry that I was at the last moment prevented from attending.'

'You must be always busy now, of course. Those dreadful politics! But you missed very little. Mrs. Grey can't sing now—quite an old timer, you know. And everybody wasn't there.'

She dabbed her eyes again, and talked heart-brokenly:

'Millions of people stayed away, and nearly all the frumps came. Old Billy Buster' (it was in this ribald way she designated that great statesman His Excellency the Governor) 'came, and said, "Hm! ha!" and fell over things; and that shocking old frump Mrs. Suthalay, you could hear her loud timbrel all night. Thank your good deeds that fate kept you away.'

'I missed a good time, anyhow,' said Gifford.

'As how?'

'You were there.'

'Oh! don't tell me that.'

She dabbed her face again, checked her tears suddenly, rose, and walked to the piano.

'Why shouldn't I?' demanded Gifford. Her secret sorrow made the whole experience piquant, and once he tasted piquancy his appetite had to ravage.

'Oh! I'm tired of all this make-believe—tired of all

the flatteries and the speeches that aren't meant, and all the rest of the sham.'

Thus did Sham enthusiastically condemn Sham, shamming even not to be Sham.

She had seated herself at the piano. She was no musician, but she had learned certain first bars of the 'Moonlight Sonata,' half of Gottschalk's 'Dying Poet,' and something else that yearned and sobbed in flats, or was decorously plaintive, and she used these as ammunition. When she played her little bit of Beethoven, and looked dreamily at a vase on the lower end of the concert grand, she saw the vase distinctly, although she pretended to look in that rapt way that is generally supposed to mean knowledge of the future and communion with the past; and then few men already attracted by her could look at her and not swear to avenge her imaginary injuries.

Gifford watched her sympathetically—doubly so because he felt so sorry for himself. He was so self-pitying in his loneliness that he was almost prepared for insincerity to the beloved who was so far away, simply by reason of her absence.

And suddenly, while he watched and she played and gazed into the past and the future and the vase on the piano at the same time, she let fall a splendid blue and lucent tear, as big as a bullock's last tear in the shambles. At that he crossed to her, put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and told her of his sorrow of her sorrow.

She looked up at him smiling, and began to sing very gently—her voice was little, but round and velvet soft—an amatorian chansonette; one of the million variations of the song, 'Sweet, sweet and long'—the song the sirens know.

He stayed there while she sang, and was for the moment the weaker. He thought many times of the necessity for a rapid and decided retreat to his chair, but her sex held him where he was, so that individuality was thrall'd by impersonality. He answered her unspoken desire unwillingly and helplessly, the tonic forced by its own law to reply to the dominant.

He saw that tears fell on the keys as she played—not too many tears, for five are interesting, and ten make the eyes red; and as if he were soothing a child he patted her shoulder, and said, knowing he was talking stupidly, but so shaken by her nearness that he was unable to say otherwise:

‘There, there! Don’t fret! There, there!’

Then she stopped playing, put up one hand and grasped his, and flirted the *mouchoir* with the other. Her long, cool, thin, pink hand lay in his, and he looked at it, and saw in that hand all the character of its owner—a woman mysterious as tangible, and frangible as mysterious.

She allowed her hand to stay in his only for a moment and then withdrew it; for though she was in her tearful, melancholy way, as light as pleasure, she was also as non-committal as theologians in argument—and they do not give away even the useless.

She was strangely drawn to him; his sympathy exaggerated her self-piteousness; he had always been desirable. Other men, who had little or nothing to do beyond ordering new clothes and stalking women, had paid to her more or less brutal court—the brutality disguised sometimes by a society smartness which was so false that it often pretended the vices it was too weak for; but here was a man who had never done her the

subtle flattery of being self-conscious in her presence, had never complimented her by patently projecting her conquest any more than he had insulted her by appearing to believe that such conquest would be easy.

At heart she was virtuous. A human husband, and not the cold formula she had married, would have kept her so ; children, even more than the best of husbands, would have made her unassailable. But she had no children, and she felt youth going, and was exceedingly sorry for herself. There is no room in the world for these half middle-aged childless women with the sham enthusiasms and the neurotic emotions that call for a new romance every fortnight.

She began to weep in earnest, and Gifford, to whom a woman's tears were pangs and the sobbing of a child agony, begged her in tones of real distress to be comforted. In emphasis of the advice he put his arm around her shoulders and brought his face close to hers.

At that she sobbed in a very delicate and refined manner, pretended to escape from his arm, tore her little sodden handkerchief with her very even teeth, which had attention directed to them by the act, and said :

‘ You—you don’t care. You wouldn’t care if I were to die.’

CHAPTER XX

‘Eloquence has its limits. There is no answer for “Get out of my house!” or “What have you to do with my wife?”’

It was a challenge few men could refuse to accept. He knew where the truth was—with Stralie, as honest as the sun, two thousand miles away, safe in the kindly tropics; while he was here in the camp of the enemy, beleaguered by his own loneliness, and his constitutional hatred of all cold, decay and winter. He knew that this new and adventitious attraction that filled his head with blood and tripped his pulsations was all false—not even the falsity of moonlight, the lie of a true moon, but of a paraselene.

Yet he said, ‘Oh, I would! You mustn’t talk so.’

‘Oh, mustn’t I? What do you care? Nobody cares.’

He wearied of her for the moment. ‘Your husband cares, doesn’t he?’

‘He! He doesn’t understand me.’

He had heard her say that before, but now it seemed to be new and doubly potent. He bent nearer and said, caressing her hand, ‘My poor child!’

‘Oh, you do care, don’t you?’

‘Of course, poor little woman!’

The poor little woman was as tall as himself, but she

seemed to have dwindled, concertina fashion, as she wept. She half responded to his caresses, still too self-conscious to be all yielding; it was not fusibility yet, but emollescence.

‘He doesn’t understand me. He has broken off all my friendships.’

‘My poor child!’

‘Friendships with men, you know.’

‘Oh!’

‘Yes. I hate women, You can’t trust any woman.’

‘Don’t you think so?’

‘Oh, no you can’t.’ Her big blue eyes saucered again. She looked up to him. ‘But you can trust men.’

It suddenly came to his mind that it is useless for women to trust women—there are no spoils to the vanquished in the event of betrayal.

She looked up at him again, misinterpreting his silence.

‘Don’t you think so?’

‘It may be in some cases.’ He thought of Stralie’s father. ‘But women are better than men.’ He thought of Stralie.

‘How noble of you to think so!’

‘I mean it. The poor women! They are man’s to mould.’

She looked at him quickly, saw that he believed it; shrank into herself again, and shed another tear.

‘Poor little woman!’

‘I’m always misunderstood.’

‘Except by me.’

‘Oh! do you understand me? I love to hear you say so.’

‘I think I understand you. You want sympathy.’

‘Yes, yes, sympathy; that’s it. Surely I have a right to sympathy from my husband.’

At that mention of her husband, all Gifford’s appreciation of the tacit deception of this conversation vanished; he knew that the woman who had discovered that she had such things as rights had lost not only all love, but all consideration for her husband.

‘There are so many of these unhappy marriages, Mr. Gifford, aren’t there?’

‘Very many. I know of only half a dozen happy marriages.’

‘Girls are brought up to be married. You don’t know what a little fool I was.’

Had he been less glamourised he would have been able to deny the assertion, on the evidence of the sort of fool she was at that moment; but the physical attraction of her saved both his politeness and his truthfulness from rupture.

She added quickly: ‘Of course I was in love with Mr. Millenet when we married;’ but it seemed that the intended palliation blackened the offence. ‘But he does not understand, and you do . . . George.’

The sound of his first name on her lips—he had not thought she knew it—completed the illusionment, and made him a self-deceiver too. He laid his hand on her hair.

She moved her head from under his hand, spurring his man-sense of the chase by pretended flight. And now she possessed him absolutely. In the proportion of the strength of his love he forgot it; in the ratio of his power of repression he became reckless, as strong men have strong maladies.

For herself she lost her self-consciousness, and so became calm enough to find her real womanliness again; checking that she had inspired, refusing her own desires, but incandescent all the time.

‘Women must marry or be drudges.’

‘Sometimes they marry and are drudges, too.’

She looked at him and laughed.

‘That must be the nether hell;’ and then more slowly, ‘To slave for a lover—yes! for a husband—no!’

She said this confidently, although she knew that she hated effort so much that she would not have slaved even to keep life in herself, whom she loved devotedly.

‘So woman loves marriage and despises the husband?’

‘Some of us do—when we are unhappy.’

Tears filled her eyes again. He took her hand and held it. She meant ‘when women are so bored with laziness that they are contradictory of everything, even of the sun—his light.’

‘Poor little woman! Why did you marry?’

‘Oh, we have to have the condition! Every woman has her price, you know?’

‘Has she?’ asked Gifford, startled.

‘Yes.’

‘Some have not.’

‘All of them have. The most popular price is a wedding-ring.’

‘But you despise the price.’

‘My price is different.’

‘What is it? Tell me. You can trust me.’

‘My price is love—George.’

‘ My poor Helen !’

There, the word was out. He wondered afterwards what devil had whispered her name to him. He could not remember where he had first known it.

She turned fully to him and sought his arms, and as they embraced they kissed.

While she lay idly against him, all her tears vanished. There was a rustling of the curtains, and the small metallic voice of Mr. Millenet said, without a trace of emotion :

‘ You scoundrel ! Leave the house at once !’

He seemed to have been prepared for this ; he was not quite the myopic formula his wife considered him.

The gallant man is he who, taking the word in all its meanings, is brave, generous, civil, or lewd—is, at least, never at a loss. Gifford never felt less gallant than at the frigid voice of Millenet contemptuously ordering him away, and he had despised the formula. If he had not, Mrs. Millenet might have fletched her arrows in vain.

He felt like a whipped child. Mrs. Millenet was ice-cold and collected. She betrayed some curiosity as to what would happen next, but no fear.

Gifford stammered something intended to be dignified, and that was too unintelligible to be anything, said ‘ Good-afternoon, Mrs. Millenet,’ in a tone that made the words and the wish ludicrous, seeing the manner of his recent surprise, backed out of the room and the house, and walked to town, a ganglion of doubt as to punishment, and of fear as to consequence.

Mrs. Millenet looked at her husband in the way that had always dominated him—chin raised, a half-inquiring, half-supercilious smile on her lips, and a

faint colour in her cheeks. She intended he should ask her pardon for his intrusion, but Millenet was too deeply wounded to be impressed by her beauty. For a moment he looked at her, his little eyes cold ; his thin lips rat-trapped in hatred, and then he, too, left the house and followed Gifford.

CHAPTER XXI

'A soul is worth only the price the seller puts on it. Any savage will sell or pawn his manhood for a looking-glass and three beads.'

MILLENET walked towards the city with no definite intentions, feeling more his resentment to Gifford than the half-wrecked faith in his wife, and very little interest in either. As his brain began to teem anew with figures—Coghlan's figures of production, Hayter's figures of expenditure, comparing certain credit figures of one year with the debit figures of another, unconsciously and in all good faith wrenching figures his way, differentiating and varying, as in the manner of the politician to suit the opportunism of the day—he almost forgot the incident. But arrived at the House, he found Gifford, as leader of the Opposition, speaking a little more nervously than his wont, and until he finished Millenet eyed him malevolently from his seat in the Ministerial corner, regarding him as a cat the mouse which is an inch outside the limit of a safe leap.

Millenet was diverted from his tigerish occupation by seeing his onetime and present enemy Berkshire (who had advised him to buy Coocooroos at forty-two shillings, but had inadvertently sold shares in his own name) sighing, groaning, and waving the voluminous notes he was never able to read during the agonies of oratory, and in other ways trying to attract the attention of the Speaker.

Millenet caught the opportunity in advance of his stertorous and self-conscious enemy, and as he rose to begin the three hours of involved figures which he called a speech, Berkshire groaned and subsided, the Premier waddled out, the House thinned, and Daven said to his chief:

‘Let’s go ; he’s safe for half the night.’

Gifford, very pleased to escape, went with him.

‘The game is in our hands, George. This Ministry’s cut its throat.’

‘How more than usual?’

‘They have got a majority of two.’

‘Yes, it isn’t much, but it’s a majority.’

‘And the Premier has been knighted.’

‘No?’

‘Yes, he’s Sir William Hoggins to-day.’

Gifford laughed.

‘So the savage has got his beads and hoop-iron at last.’

‘Yes, and he’s finished with.’

‘But how? The majority is still there.’

‘It won’t be ; a portfolio will make the majority ours, leaving out the fact that the rats will leave the ship.’

‘Ah, but will they?’

‘Dead sure. When a politician takes a title, isn’t he doomed? And when they’re already back-numbers and going for a constituency again, doesn’t Sir Thomas Jones become plain democratic Tom Jones until after the poll?’

‘That’s true.’

‘The game’s ours. Two shoddy titles in the Ministry before, and now the Premier takes one. I tell you they’re our meat.’

‘I believe you! I think you’re right.’

‘Right, but——’ He regarded Gifford narrowly. ‘What’s the matter with you? You don’t seem to care for anything.’

‘Jack, I’ve acted the fool more this afternoon than ever.’

‘What have you been doing now?’

‘Probably losing my girl and my chances of advancement.’

‘Who’s the woman?’

‘I was too hot-headed to take your advice, Jack, and——’

‘Good Lord! Mrs. Millenet.’

‘Yes, Jack.’

‘How far did it go?’

‘I don’t exactly know. I think I had her in my arms, and I believe I had kissed her.’

‘Well, that’s all right. Don’t go to see her again, don’t write any letters, and be out when she calls.’

‘She won’t call and I won’t see her again, but the mischief’s done. Her husband caught us.’

‘What! what! Oh! you fool! And what a miserable little calculating machine he is! He catches another man kissing his wife, and he consoles himself with talking figures.’

‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘Do nothing. Good Lord! Statistics for a broken heart.’

Graham joined them.

‘Millenet’s in great form to-night; he quoted Mulhall back to 1856.’

‘He needn’t go back further than half-past three to-day if he wants to be quite happy.’

‘Why?’

‘Better tell him, Chief,’ said Daven.

‘Doc., you gave me excellent advice, and I didn’t take it. I went to see the lady, and her husband caught us kissing!’

‘Oh, you idiot! Didn’t I tell you! And now you’ve ruined your own chances and lost your girl and damned the opportunities of every man who has followed you.’

‘It’s not so bad as that yet, Doc. Millenet may keep it quiet.’

‘He may, but you can’t apply a man’s standards to Millenet. When he forgets his outraged honour in Mulhall and Coghlan—well!’

‘Doctor, I’ve been a fool, a double fool, because I pulled my friends into the mud with me.’

‘Never mind! Never mind! We’re not in the mud yet.’

‘The suspense of waiting for this man to strike is the worst. What a fool I’ve been!’

‘He may not strike at all; may he, Daven? And anyhow, he won’t strike yet. He’ll wait till he finds whether statistics make him a cuckold or not.’

‘Oh! steady, doctor—don’t be brutal.’

‘My brutality will never get me into the trouble your politeness makes for you. . . . Never mind, old man; sorry I spoke. When in doubt—drink. Let’s have a whisky.’

In the refreshment-room the Premier was as close to the bar counter as his stoutness allowed him. He seemed more swollen than usual, as if the pride and pomp of his decoration had inflated him physically. He was surrounded by a little crowd, half of enemies,

half of friends, the enemies congratulating him the more warmly.

'I knew this would be,' said Graham to Daven and Gifford; 'I knew it a week ago—there was an article in one of the papers about Hoggins's ancestors—no less. You know the kind of thing, written to show that his family had been used to titles, and that he could safely sleep in his new one without taking the shape out of it.'

The new Knight was talking. 'I know I was goin' to get the knight'ood, but I thought it was goin' to be a K.C.M.G.; but the Colonial Orfis wrote the Governor that they were givin' away a lot er K.C.M.Gees this season, an' there was a K.B. left, an' I might 'ave that. So I took it.'

The three friends turned away, the irascible Graham commenting, 'He was told he might have that—a case of giving out cold meat at the back door. What worms these people are!'

'It's all wrong—it's all rotten!' said Gifford, for the first time forgetting the accident of that afternoon. 'The real manhood of Australia hidden by a few foreign imported merchants or financiers!'

'Don't you be afraid,' said Daven. 'Titles don't impose on the people here. Mark my words: in a month Hoggins is a private member, and next election he'll lose his seat, even with a dozen Reform Leagues and Conservative reactions, and lying newspapers to help him.'

'I am not sure, Jack; I am not sure.'

'I am!' said Graham emphatically. 'The people saw through the farce of titles long ago. They've been so wrenched from their true value; the times are such they can have none now. Once they distinguished—

now they only make conspicuous. Why, man, its only our worst men who accept them. Half a dozen of 'em were in gaol, or should have been, over the bank frauds. We'll reserve the foreign title for our distinguished criminals by-and-by.'

At that his two companions laughed, and they went to dinner very merrily.

CHAPTER XXII

‘Stealing would be pleasant enough if thieves were hanged only by the girdle.’

A FORTNIGHT had passed; Millenet had not spoken; Hoggins’ majority had become a minority. The Government had existed, not by its own strength, but by reason of its opponents’ ignorance of its weakness. The offer of a minor portfolio and an honorary minister-ship had made the weakness patent; five had deserted for love of the two who had been bribed.

So soon as Gifford, Daven, Graham, and their followers succeeded to the Government, Sir William Hoggins, still much swollen by the newness of his title, had shown a desire to play the part of a pathetic Cincinnatus. Graham was Minister for Health and Education; Daven, Minister of Mines—a position he said he had no right to, as he knew something about mining! In the good old days of coalitions, of city lawyers and soft goods importers, the portfolio of Mines had been the inalienable property of the representative of the wool trade.

Gifford, as the new Treasurer, was fired with the ambition of the New Australian—to stop foreign borrowing and foreign importing, to tax land and absentees. In the excitement and hope of the new life he had almost forgotten the nightmare of Millenet’s discovery.

Stralie and Abbey had telegraphed their congratulations, and he replied to Stralie's telegram in such a letter that she laughed from sheer joy and pride—until she cried of satiety.

The position was practically secured, not quite. As representatives who had accepted offices of profit, a new election was necessary to ratify their actions by their constituencies; and to the new Ministry the ratification did not seem such a supremely intelligent safeguard of the Constitution as it had appeared when Hoggins and his Ministry had to face the electors.

'But it's all right,' said Graham, answering the unspoken wish of the others. 'We're going out for a walk-over—nobody will have the cheek to oppose Ministers. Anyhow, Gifford and Daven, and Curran and myself are safe against anybody.'

He partially lost his sublime self-confidence the day after the issue of the writs for the new elections, when Curran, the new Minister of Lands, came to him, saying: 'I put the shtopper on a man to-day. Talking about Gifford, he was.'

'What was he saying?'

'Oh, that 'tis looky there was no scandal likely about the Prime-eer an' Mrs. Millenet!'

'Good heavens, man! You don't mean to tell me that yarn's about?'

'True enough; an' this man, he said it was another case of Charless Shtuart Parnell an' Kitty O'Shea.'

'The devil he did!'

'Yes; an' a friend that overheard him in the club told me, an' I went to the man an' put the shtopper on him.'

'Good man, you.'

‘But says he: “I’ll say no more, but plenty of others will.” Then says I: “Who told you this mighty lie about Gifford, that I’d trust with my own sister? Is it that dirty little Chinese calculatin’-board, Millenet?” “No,” says he; “that’s the funny part of it. ’Tis Mrs. Millenet herself.”’

‘Wha-at?’

‘When he told me, I jumped just so, an’ this man—I won’t give ye his name, for he’s decent, and he won’t talk—he says Millenet an’ his wife haven’t spoken since, an’ Mrs. Millenet hasn’t been out of the house since, an’ every woman that calls to see her she tells everything, an’ flogs an’ sheds tears all over the furniture.’

‘Damn the woman! She can’t keep even a secret like that! She must cackle and tell the story against herself!’

‘If she has no more vartue than brains, she’ll see the Chief Justice next Divorce Coort.’

‘And do many know of it?’

‘Many! I belave the tea-rooms ’ll be full of it next week. Every woman who ever knew her has taken a sudden vi’lent fancy to her. They all go there and cry with her and have tea, and pump her—pump her dhry, man.’

‘Oh, the fool, the fool! But if it stays at the tea-rooms, and doesn’t get into the papers, we’re safe. After the elections, let ’em talk!’

‘Yes; but send somebody to warn her against her talking any more—somebody she knows.’

‘I don’t know of any woman she knows.’

‘Any woman! No woman! You might as well advertise it on every hoarding in the Shtate as thrust a woman to square it! No; it must be a man!’

‘Well, then, Curran, you go.’

‘Me, is it? Man, I couldn’t do it, and I wouldn’t. Me wife hates her, be reason of Mrs. Millenet bein’ impident about Mrs. Curran havin’ so many children. Send Daven. He’s level-headed; she won’t get any change out of him.’

‘Daven it is. Let’s find him.’

They found Daven, and he first refused, then objected, and agreed when they showed him that Gifford’s personal fate as well as the fate of the Ministry depended on the securing of Mrs. Millenet’s silence.

He walked out to South Yarra feeling as if he were a convict on the way to execution. Apart from the delicate nature of his mission, which involved the insolence of asking a lady to cease destroying her own reputation, he hesitated at witnessing the mental sufferings of a woman who must be modest even if she were a suicidal fool.

But when he was ushered into Mrs. Millenet’s morning room he found no trace of the monopathy he had imagined. He advanced awkwardly. His political experiences had made him easy of manner among men and before audiences, but he had not grown, and probably would never grow, out of the natural awkwardness he felt when in the presence of well-dressed women, who seemed to be of another world, because they neither toiled, nor spun, nor bore children, nor were in any way useful to the earth they cumbered.

She had discarded the sombre robes that had helped to the undoing of Gifford, and had anticipated the summer in her dress of pink silk and cream lace, with a knot of violets at her throat. All of it was almost in good taste, but not quite; for she had no equipoise in

anything, and slightly overdid her dress as she overfelt her emotions. The violets exaggerated the blueness of her eyes; the pink silk accentuated the flush on her cheek; and Daven gasped at seeing such radiance where he had expected to find a pale, broken lily of a woman, soddened in widow's tears and etiolated by lamentation.

She came to meet him blushing, like a happy bride.

'Oh, Mr. Daven! How good of you to come to see poor little me! Do you know, all my men friends have deserted me lately.'

He could only mutter 'Good-day' and 'Really.' He was not surprised at the information, but merely stricken dumb by this unexpectedly gay reception.

'I was thinking of you to-day. And so you're really Minister for Mines?'

'Not really yet, Mrs. Millenet. We have to face another election yet.'

'But nobody is likely to oppose any of you. The Government is so strong and every member of it so popular.'

Daven took the plunge.

'There's only one thing that could defeat us, Mrs. Millenet. I'm sure you'll pardon anything I'm forced to say.'

She paled a little, but her voice was equable.

'Of course, of course, Mr. Daven. I can't imagine you saying anything you shouldn't.'

'Well—you see—of course I don't believe it, but people are talking about you and Gifford.'

'Oh, Mr. Daven! Oh! oh! how could they?'

'Yes; of course I believe there's no truth in it.'

'There isn't—there isn't indeed!'

‘But they say you have told people that Mr. Millenet came in while you and Mr. Gifford were—er—talking.’

‘Oh, it’s not true; and I only told two or three! I’ll never forgive that Mrs. Kalman—never!’

‘I am sure you wouldn’t like to conduce, even in the slightest degree, to the ruin of Gifford and the party.’

‘I! I don’t want to ruin anybody, I’m sure. The—b-b-bub-beasts! If I couldn’t keep a secret, I’d—I’d—kill myself!’

‘You won’t mention it again to a soul, will you?’

‘I won’t—I won’t; I’d rather die!’

She turned her beautiful eyes to his.

‘And oh, Mr. Daven, I’m so lonely! My husband never speaks to me—never!’

‘I am awfully sorry, Mrs. Millenet.’

‘And it’s all his fault, Mr. Daven. He doesn’t understand me. Everybody else in the world does. He doesn’t.’

‘I am very sorry—really.’

‘Mr. Gifford understood me; so do you, don’t you?’

She unmasked her batteries again. She stepped closer to him; he thought she would fall. Pity overmastered prudence: he put his arm around her waist, and she laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed there.

He felt an agony of embarrassment, and wrenched himself from her, and said ‘Good-bye!’ continuously until he had backed out of the room. The air in the gardens was very cool, yet Daven lifted his hat to wipe the perspiration from his brow.

‘My grief!’ said he, unconsciously copying Ned the Prodigal. ‘If I hadn’t had Luce, that woman would have put me in the same street with Gifford.’

He reported progress to his friends, and for a day

they were satisfied, and then the tea-rooms had a new story—fabricated by Mrs. Millenet—with Daven as the very faulty hero. According to Mrs. Millenet, Daven was violently in love with her; but, of course, she had been unable to give him any hope. As the story did not concern Gifford, Gifford heard the story first, of course, and recounted it to Graham and Curran. The former's sense of humour blinded him to the consequences.

'Good Lord!' he said. 'Before that woman's finished all the Cabinet will be co-respondents.' But having had his laugh, he suddenly grew grave. 'We can only die once, and that once we've got to die well. Look out for squalls, you fellows.'

A week passed and the squalls did not come. The social-political atmosphere was very calm, but it was the calm of the Barrier Reef in March, of Bass Straits in October—the calm that is the herald of cyclones.

CHAPTER XXIII

‘ When Fate looks cross-eyed at a man, a mouse can bite him to death.’

THE calm continued till two days before nomination, with little movement in the constituencies, as opposition was so unlikely as to appear impossible; Millenet speaking no word to his wife and few words to anybody; Mrs. Millenet weeping every morning, and making herself radiantly beautiful every afternoon when she talked confidences with ‘ her dearest friend ’ (the caller of the time was always her ‘ dearest friend ’), but under strict pledge of secrecy; Graham waiting in badly-concealed anxiety, and telling himself twice an hour that Gifford was a damned idiot; Curran, quietly anxious, but by a great effort of will keeping the cause of his anxiety a secret from his wife; Gifford himself, plunging into his new duties in a fever of impatience of the suspense, and seeking to palliate his half-serious defection by writing to Stralie every day—letters that made for her a new heaven and a new earth, that gave to the tropical beauty of Mrs. Hempel’s garden a loveliness that only lovers’ eyes could see, that made herself transcendently beautiful, so that nearly all who saw her worshipped her, with Frank Abbey for priest, and Annie Johns and Delia Mills as acolytes.

Daven's straightforwardness had helped him with some dignity out of Millenet's house; it helped him, with no loss of love, out of suspicion.

He told his wife, and first she set her teeth and railed at 'that woman,' and secondly she flashed her eyes at her husband, and demanded the reason he had talked with such a woman.

'Well, you see, dear, Gifford——'

'Oh, Gifford, is he a god, that everything he does is excused, and other people are always ready to suffer for his sins?'

'Not sins, dear. Why, the blessed woman flopped on me. Gifford was lonely and a bit foolish.'

'A bit foolish! He's a fool all through. I never liked him.'

'How can you say that, Luce? You used to tell me how much you admired him.'

'That was before he got my husband into a row with that woman and her husband.'

'Don't say any more, Luce. Everything will be all right. After the Government's returned everything will be forgotten.'

But when he next saw Gifford and Graham and Curran, and heard that the exaggerated story of Mr. Daven and Mrs. Millenet had made the Gifford episode of secondary importance, that all Mrs. Millenet's 'dearest friends' were telling the story with little shrieks and gasps of merriment, and cries to the Spirit of Humour to be merciful, almost all his hopes departed and left him cold.

Graham was furious. 'Millenet is evidently not such a bad fellow, after all,' he said. 'He decided to send his wife to Coventry and to keep silent, and then the

she-lunatic herself gives the whole game away. What is it—Machiavellian cunning or just plain idiotcy?’

It was neither. It was, perhaps unconsciously to herself, partly a revenge on her husband for that very sending of her ‘to Coventry’; it was more—mere vanity.

‘She must be stopped till the day after to-morrow,’ said Curran.

‘That’s a certainty; but who’s to do it?’ asked Graham.

‘You are,’ replied Curran.

‘I?’

‘Yes, you. Daven’s done *his* duty.’

‘And made a nice mess of it.’

‘That wasn’t your fault. Now, Graham is older, and he looks too aggressive for the lady to melt again. Graham, old chap, it’s up to you.’

‘My dear fellow, I’d sooner face a hundred drunken Kanakas than that insinuating cat!’

‘Well, then, the game is probably up,’ said Gifford despairingly; ‘and it’s all my fault.’

‘Oh, damn it! don’t talk like that! I’ll go.’

‘Old man, you’ve saved us all.’

‘I hope I have,’ replied the Doctor grimly. ‘If this fails, we’ve got to play the ancient Roman and die on our own reputations. They’re pointed enough to kill us.’

* * * * *

Mrs. Millenet had lost the radiance of a few days before, but wore as bright a dress, the gown of youth, although her pallor belonged to the dead-black silk she wore on the day of the undoing of Gifford; and thus she was doubly dangerous.

‘Good afternoon, Doctor. I must congratulate you.’

Graham waved the unfinished sentence away almost rudely. He had been saying to himself as he walked from the railway-station, 'She'll find her blandishments lost on me,' and now he replied: 'I don't know, madam. Is your husband in?'

'No, Doctor. Why?'

'Because I don't want to see him. This nonsense has got to stop. Good Lord! one woman breaking up a Cabinet! It's preposterous!'

'Won't you take a chair? And poor me! Why, Helen and Cleopatra——'

'Never mind 'em, ma'am. You're not Helen or Cleopatra either, I hope. No, thanks; I prefer to stand.'

'You're very disagreeable; and I'm so unhappy!'

She sank into a chair as she spoke, and dabbed her eyes with the frail *mouchoir*—so little and so foolishly inadequate to its real purpose, that the Doctor said afterwards that the affectation almost nauseated him.

'Can't help that, ma'am. Who caused it? Yourself. Look at the smash it means.'

'I am sure it is not my fault. . . . I think the world's a b-b-bub-beast.'

'It is your fault. You talk of Cleopatra. Why not say Messalina?'

'If I knew who she was, I'd be qu-qu-ite offended. I think you're brutal.'

'And this isn't Egypt, and we're not Antonys. This is Melbourne in the twentieth century, and there's an easy Divorce Act here.'

'Oh, Doctor, don't! don't! don't mention divorce! I've been ill ever since my husband used the word to me.'

'Did he threaten a divorce?'

‘Y-y-yes; he was qu-quite—brutal. Why, nobody would speak to me then. And Carrie wouldn’t let me kiss her children, or anything, if I were found out.’

‘Mrs. Millenet, is there anything to find out?’

‘Oh, Doctor, it’s an insult to ask me such a thing! If you weren’t a doctor I wouldn’t answer.’

‘But, being a doctor——?’

‘Oh, well, a doctor isn’t like a man!’

‘Thank you.’

‘Men are nice; doctors are hard and beastly, and stay on the other side of the room, and make you strain your voice when you’re sick with crying.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll sit down. Will that do?’

She coughed a little and wiped her lips, and then said, a little slyly, but with due regard to picturesqueness: ‘I think I’m consumptive, too. . . . I ho-ho-hope I am. It will spite Henry.’

Graham was impervious. ‘That’s a question for your medical adviser, madam. What I must know is, whether there is any chance of an open scandal through Mr. Daven?’

He knew her well. He asked the question he could have answered himself.

She replied, almost contemptuously: ‘With Mr. Daven! How can you ask that? Why, it’s impossible!’

‘But I heard that your husband found him with his arm around your waist.’

That was Mrs. Millenet’s own exaggeration as published in the tea-rooms. Now that her own lie came back to her she treated it as a truth.

‘Henry certainly makes a ridiculous fuss about nothing. Why, a man puts his arm round your waist when you’re dancing.’

‘This wasn’t dancing.’

‘Oh, don’t worry, Doctor. It was just like dancing, only there was no music.’

He had to laugh, and she joined in it, though from a different motive.

‘Isn’t it silly of Henry, Doctor?’

‘I don’t know that it is. When a man is married to a beautiful woman, he must be bloodless if he isn’t sometimes jealous.’

‘Do you think I’m beautiful, Doctor?’ The colour came into her face again, her blue eyes saucered at him, and he saw the danger and looked over her head.

‘Yes, you are beautiful.’

She laughed like a child at play. ‘And is Henry jealous?’

‘He must be, unless he’s dead.’

‘Oh, I’m glad, I’m glad!’

‘But has he anything to be jealous of, really jealous—Mr. Gifford, for instance?’

She paled. ‘Oh, Doctor! there was nothing wrong. I couldn’t. Why, my mother is dead only two years.’

Graham passed over the irrelevancy. ‘And when your husband discovered you with Mr. Gifford were you—er—dancing without music?’

‘Ye-s, just like that.’

‘What about the many meetings before that; your husband probably knows of them?’

‘Oh, Doctor! there was no harm. We were both lonely—and he’s so handsome; and I was sorry for him, and I was so unhappy and he was so kind, and we were both so miserable that——’

‘That you were happy?’

‘Yes, yes, Doctor—just like that.’

‘And Gifford had you in his arms——’

‘Oh, Doctor! don’t, don’t!’

‘And was kissing you when your husband came in?’

‘Oh, I suppose so. I didn’t know, really. I couldn’t have meant any harm, because, when Mr. Gifford took me in his arms because I was lonely and crying—you know——’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Well, I couldn’t have meant any harm, because I didn’t know what I was doing. I was in a dream. You know, don’t you, Doctor?’

‘Yes, I know,’ he said grimly, yet amusedly; for his own memories crowded on him.

‘So I couldn’t have intended any wrong, could I?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘And now everybody is against me, and Carrie will take her children away, and I wish I were dead.’

She rose, passed him, and seated herself in a new attitude at the piano, her arms on the closed keyboard and her face hidden in her hands. Human nature could not withstand it. Graham read her truly, in her more than childish irresponsibility, but he could no more help pitying her than he could help pitying a wayward child insistent on hurting himself in spite.

He followed her and laid his hand half on her shoulder, half on her adorable neck, and said soothingly, but without losing sight of the real reason of his visit: ‘Now you’ll be a good girl, won’t you, and you’ll not talk about your private business any more and bring us all into trouble?’

‘No, D-d-d-doctor, I won’t. You’re very kind. I’ll do anything you say.’

‘There’s a good girl! You wouldn’t like to ruin the Government, would you?’

‘N-n-no, Doctor.’

‘You see, they’ve never had a doctor here as Minister for Health, and I want a chance of making a name at it?’

‘Y-y-yes, Doctor.’

‘There’s a good girl. Now, you refuse to say a word, and all will blow over. Good-bye, my dear.’

She rose, showing a face without a trace of weeping.

‘Good-bye, Doctor. You’re a dear man. I won’t forget your kindness.’

They shook hands and she melted again.

‘What shall I do when you’ve gone? Nobody comes to see me except a lot of inquisitive cats.’

‘But you said they were your dearest friends.’

‘I suppose so.’ She sniffed a smelling-bottle. ‘That’s why they’re cats.’

She brought the serviceable handkerchief to her eyes again, and at that he soothed her with gentle words.

‘Now! now! I’m your friend.’

‘And you’ll always be, won’t you, Doctor?’

She looked up at him again and smiled. In a flash he found they were in the position she called ‘just like dancing, only without the music,’ and the discovery filled him with rage. With as much brusquerie as he had entered, and in a voice raspy with anger, he said: ‘Good-day, Mrs. Millenet. I hope we’ll hear no more of this nonsense,’ and got himself out of the house with another display of that rudeness which was at once armour and weapon.

‘You’re a fool still,’ he said to himself, walking in the wrong direction in his indignation at his own softness.

‘You said you understood women, and you do; but

you don't understand this one, and she almost caught you. . . . Good Lord! if Millenet had come in! . . . And if I had held her two minutes more. . . . Well, I'd have forgotten all about the Minister for Health.'

At the entrance-gates to Millenet's grounds he stopped and looked back at the house.

'He's not such a bad man, after all,' he said in tardy recognition of his enemy's manliness; 'and if he's fond of her, he must have his board and lodging in hell!'

Said Curran, on hearing the story: 'If every man of us don't resign his portfolio, the whole lot of us will be co-respondents.'

Until half an hour before the closing of nominations, there was not one elector who entertained the possibility of opposition to any of the Ministers. And half an hour later the telegraphs were flashing to the Metropolis the news that each of the Ministers of this very popular Government was opposed by a nobody in each instance. They were not even young nobodies; they were middle-aged frauds who were not even 'has beens,' but only 'never weres'—ancient gentlemen, resurrected and nominated by the Deformed League, the Free Trade League, the Bible-Reading in State Schools League, the Total Abstinence Societies and other weird associations for the suppression of drink, the Labour Party, the Land Tax, and Human Nature.

CHAPTER XXIV

‘ “Success to you ! God speed *our* work !” said the hangman to the judge.’

THE day after the nominations Hoggins formally retired from the leadership of the Opposition, and Millenet succeeded. Gifford, Daven, and Graham accepted the development in anxious silence; Curran fought it noisily. But none of them regarded seriously the opposition in their own constituencies.

Two days later Gifford was served with a citation in divorce—Millenet *v.* Millenet, co-respondent George Gifford. A bolt from the blue, when all the indiscretion seemed over, past and forgotten.

It affected Graham and Daven to red rage and Gifford to white wrath. He calmed to freezing-point now that he saw the supreme struggle imminent. If the constituencies upheld the Ministry, it would pre-judge the divorce action in his favour; if otherwise, position was lost, the friends who had followed him were lost, and, crowning shame and sorrow, Stralie would be lost to him also.

The activity against the Ministry was strongest in the constituencies of the Premier, the Minister for Mines, and the Minister for Health; all Conservative opinion and propertied strength were directed against Gifford,

who, as Treasurer, proposed the imposition of a land tax; against Daven, who as Minister for Mines would administer his Department rigorously in justice of miners; against Graham, who as Minister for Health would surely sow with thorns the way of transgressing dairymen and insanitary shire councillors. That bright and shining light of Toryism, Forby, the father of child-slaves, had been selected to oppose Gifford; the full bitterness of the opposition appearing a few days before the holding of the poll, when the Social Purity Society (that, despairing of discovering any purity in itself, had ventured into the cold world to find that variable and undefined quality) announced that 'Mr. Forby, the good-man candidate,' had been selected to carry the Social Purity vote, as against Gifford, who was by inference socially impure.

Gifford gritted his teeth on the bullet and waited impatiently for the supreme test of fortitude when Stralie should hear of the scandal and write to ask him, 'Is it true or false?'

Meanwhile, the opposition to Gifford waxed virulent. His electorate first, and latterly the electorates of his colleagues, were made hideous by great calico signs calling on the electors to:

'Vote for Social Purity and a Happy Fireside!'

'Vote for the Bible in State Schools and the Sacredness of Marriage!'

'Vote against Socialism, the Land Tax, and Free Love!'

They mixed Protection and polyandrisms in the most wonderful manner, showed that Free Trade and Government by property votes were the basis of all virtuous living; that Bible-reading in State schools

and a system of non-interference with the owners of dirty dairies and Legree dairymen, who bred children because each toil-wrecked child saved the wages of a man-help, were one and the same thing; that State protection of children enslaved by their parents was a direct stultification of that Providence which has ordained that every freeborn citizen shall have the right to wallop his own nigger or his own son; and, shortly, that Gifford and Old-age Pensions were anathema; and that Forby, Protestantism, Free Trade, Social Purity, the Abolition of the Labour Party, and Free Manure for Farmers, the only safe guides to the millennium. All of the Cabinet were Protestant excepting Curran; the introduction of sectarianism was aimed at him.

It was so comic that all the tragedy that underlay it could not destroy the humour of it; although the comments of Gifford, Daven, and Graham were bitter, if merry.

And then came a telegram from Stralie:

‘Please wire me it is not true, love.’

So she trusted him still, even to this end; and for that reason, even if not for the reason of the man’s innate honesty, he wrote her fully, telling everything, not sparing himself—writing as a man might confess from a scaffold at the end of hope, without reservation and without excuse.

Then he telegraphed ‘Posted letter,’ knowing that she would be in agonies of expectancy until the letter came to her, and seeing no way in strict honesty how he could save her the smallest pang.

He returned to his electorate dully hoping that the

voice of the people might yet prove to be the voice of God, and speak truly and acquit him ; and fighting his best, though prepared for the worst, and probably because of it.

At Korringajork the pig-man who had been President of the Shire of Goorambat during Gifford's first campaign refused to preside at the meeting of the Unclean Candidate ; but the schoolmaster, as being the most unpopular man in the electorate by reason of his openly expressed contempt for the unspeakable ' prodoocers,' said he would gladly take the chair, and on his own initiative gave a half-holiday to his school, Gifford's meeting being held in the afternoon.

The children loitered by the door of the crazy billiard-room ; the electors had unaccountably discovered as much interest in politics as if politics were pig sales. Even many women were there. At first Gifford regarded these proofs of newly-awakened interest as being signs of a political revival in his favour ; later he knew the truth—the women had come to see, not the candidate, but the co-respondent.

On entering the room he stopped to talk to the small daughter of the bull-voiced ex-president of the Shire of Goorambat—the girl who had given the great bunch of wattle and roses to Stralie a year ago—and who now blushed her pleasure and answered him as if he were a god.

This seeing, the bull-voiced man called to her to ' Come over 'ere 'megeately, Hemmer,' and then Gifford knew that these low organisms, these child oppressors, these thieves who battened on the Government and talked the braggart lie of the holy independence of private enterprise, had labelled him ' leper.'

He walked a few paces towards the improvised platform and saw Willie Forby, taller and slimmer than ever, his hands and ears bloated with chilblains and sores; and he stopped to talk to the boy, who received the advance as the daughter of the bull-voiced man had done—shyly and worshippingly.

Mrs. Forby, greasier and more slovenly than before, and providing another outward sign of her mental emptiness in a rapidly-growing moustache, called Willie away from contamination; and as Gifford left the boy and advanced in her direction, the virtuous matron turned her back magnificently. It was not more than usually her fault that her dignified pose was discounted by certain tapes protruding between skirt and bodice, and by a gaping placket.

Gifford addressed them, and the schoolmaster had much enjoyment. He would have been a martinet in any position of authority; nature and inclination, seeing that he despised all Gifford's opponents and was, furthermore, Gifford's friend, made him a very vigorous chairman.

When Gifford closed his address he whispered to the chairman to close the meeting, but that zealous supporter proposed a vote of confidence, and so gave an opportunity to the secretary of the local Reform League to state in a series of roundabout insinuations that the electorate and the country wanted good moral men, who would tax men rather than tax land.

The vote was against Gifford, and it was a faithful index to the result of the elections. Curran was returned by such a majority that his opponent, who had all the virtues—sexual morality; total abstinence from all things, including alcohol; Free Trade beliefs, and a

blind hatred of Rome ; all excepting the virtue of kindness—lost his deposit. Graham was elected by ten votes, but the new Government was wrecked—its Premier and all its Ministers but two defeated by political accidents of the type of Forby.

And then Gifford knew that Stralie's answer, after his confession of his half sincerity, would be kinder but more draconically just than even the verdict of the constituencies ; he knew that his life, though it might not be wrecked, was neaped.

A week later he had cleared up his business and prepared his simple defence to Millenet's petition.

'What is the next step ?' he asked Graham.

'You must advise the Governor to send for Millenet.'

'I—I'm damned if I will ! Why, the whole position is indecent. It is as if his wife were guilty and he were trying to make money and position out of her infidelity ; or that he knows her to be innocent, and is so much the viler scoundrel that he is trying to get into power by blackening his wife and me.'

'No ! Millenet is dirty in his vindictiveness, but he's clean in his hatred. He believes that you and his wife are guilty, but he didn't want to make a position out of it—he only wanted to ruin you.'

'He *has* ruined me !' said Gifford, with much bitterness. 'And now you say I'm to play the magnanimous, and advise the Governor to send for him.'

'There's nothing you could do better for yourself than advise it, and nothing he could do worse for himself than to accept it.'

'Too honourable ?' sneered Gifford.

'Partly that, and partly because he's too cunning.'

So Gifford advised the Governor to send for Millenet,

and Millenet refused the commission, but dug Cincinnatus Hoggins out of his alleged retirement and brought him back as Premier, to keep the position warm for Millenet.

And then Gifford, having said good-bye to all the friends of his political life, went to the country to join Daven (now in retirement on that deep lead-mine, which could not produce gold, but could drown men and did), there to rusticate until sentence should be pronounced by Australia Field.

CHAPTER XXV

THE spring, for all the drought of the last two years, came to Coocooroo with something of the beauty that belongs to the season. Moonlight prompted a dance or two at Eclipse Corner and a hospital ball at Coocooroo.

Tommy the Dog, chief of navvies, maker of the pace in galloping out ballast wakes, did not leave the district with the army of navvies when the main railway construction had finished. He had a hut near the smelters', where he was supposed to sell hop-beer only, and, far from obeying supposition, he did not sell hop-beer at all, although there were six bottles of that marvellous drink in the little shop-window—bottles that served as a cemetery for flies.

Charley Byers rode up to the shanty late in the afternoon to ask its proprietor to send him next day the two timber-getters who lodged there; and as no man of gentlemanly instincts may leave a shanty without drinking or losing his reputation for the gentlemanly instincts aforesaid, Charley asked all and sundry to drink.

He had passed Miss Field at Marble Hill. She bowed and smiled graciously to him. She looked radiantly beautiful, for she had just heard of her lover's

accession to the premiership, and was almost painfully happy. Byers had never before seen her or any other woman so beautiful ; even his idealization of pleasant-faced, dumpy Annie Johns was discounted by Miss Field's loveliness.

The mail had been delivered before he left Coocooroo, and in Silver Street he met her again in the late afternoon, and bowed to her ; but she seemed not to see him, and he saw that her beauty had gone, and left the perfect face gray, as if the light of life had been suddenly withdrawn. She had received a murderous letter that day—a gossipy letter, full of careless stabs that made plain all the insinuations of the two weekly papers that some kind friend in Melbourne had sent, after carefully marking the interesting paragraphs in red.

She did not believe the slander, but she was tortured by the suspicion that in some unexplainable way it might be true, or colourably true. The shock of even finding that she could not at once put away from her the shadow of a suspicion of him left her heart cold and her brain numb ; but she instinctively sought her friend, and frightened that lady by her pallor.

‘ Good heavens, Stralie ! you’re ill.’

‘ No, I am not, dear ; but if I can’t believe in George with all my heart and soul, I’ll be heart-broken.’

‘ George ! What ! poor old George ! Why, what has he done ?’

But she uttered the reassuring interrogations so haltingly that Stralie looked at her, and noted her heightened colour.

‘ May ! You know it, too.’

‘ I ? Well, I certainly did have a letter last mail

from Winnie Jervis. But you know her, and gossip is nearly always lies.'

'But the newspapers wouldn't dare if it were untrue, May.'

'My dear, newspapers will dare anything, even the most cowardly of them. Nobody horsewhips editors in our country, unfortunately. The little beasts are not afraid of the libel law, because decent people won't go into a court. They're only afraid of being thrashed and of losing advertisements.'

'Oh, if it's untrue—untrue in every way—I'll love George better than any man was ever loved before, and I'll never believe anything against him, even if an angel swore it.'

'My dear, I know George; at the worst it's only a flirtation.'

'A flirtation! It's just as bad. It's insincerity—just as bad as the worst. It's only a difference in degree.'

'Don't be quixotic, Stralie.'

'Quixote was the soul of honour—that's why most people laughed at him. They couldn't understand truth.'

'You're an extremist, Stralie.'

'I'm not—I'm not! If the code of honour of poor vulgar people who have to work before they can eat makes a great deceit a crime, we ought to look on our smallest deceit as a bigger crime than their great one.'

'Have a cup of tea, dear, and don't be too serious.'

'Look at George's advantages, May—young, strong, wealthy, his ambition gratified, and—and having me. If he even flirted with this woman he deserves the worst.'

‘My dear—my dear! this is foolish! Even the poor people you pity so much are not treated like that. You’d have one law for the rich and another for the poor.’

‘So there should be. Punish them according to the advantages they had. Why, surely happiness ought to bribe us to be good.’

‘My dear, it doesn’t; human nature is like that. Look at me. I get bothered over Will this morning—he being away and all that—and I go into the kitchen this morning in a perfect beast of a temper, and bully that poor cook until I found she had been awake all night with neuralgia.’

‘Your sins are very white, May.’

‘They’re black enough for me, dear. But when we were poor, and I did all the little housework and cooked Will’s dinner myself, I was a better woman. It’s easier for the poor to be good than it is for the rich. Work, and not eating too much, and not having too much time to think—that makes them good.’

‘May, if it’s true I’ll never forgive him.’

‘Stralie, if it’s true you will forgive him.’

‘I won’t.’

‘You will, dear. You know I am not a very strong Giffordite, because I wanted you to have Frank; he’s a more reliable man.’

‘Mr. Abbey is not worth George’s shoelace to me.’

‘And for that reason you’ll forgive him.’

‘I won’t, and I won’t rest a minute without knowing. I’ll wire to him now.’

‘Let me see it before you send it.’ Here is a telegraph-form, dear.’

Stralie wrote a line and passed it to Mrs. Hempel.'

'You must put "love" at the end of it, Stralie.'

'Oh, I can't write the word, feeling as I do.'

'You must. It's unfair. You are showing you believe him guilty before you know the charges, and he may not know them either. So you must show you still have faith in him.'

Stralie took up the pen and scrawled the word.

'There! Will that do?'

'You're a darling! and there's a kiss from George. I'll send it off now. Never mind the money. I'll charge it to the company.'

'Oh, May!'

'Oh, May! Things are going from bad to worse—a shilling more or less can't help their million.'

For a night and a day Stralie did not find relief from that numbness of heart and body; and then came hope that made her almost happy again. Gifford's telegram certainly did not deny anything, but she tried to believe as she wanted to believe, and attributed the evasion to his hatred of any publicity of his private affairs. And then the last word, 'love,' spelled new life to her, so that for the eight days that elapsed between the arrivals of the telegram and his explanatory letter she filled the house with music, and was so radiant that Mrs. Hempel's eyes followed her with glances full of affection.

And then the letter came, and she grew into stone as she read it. That fatal document told the honest fact without reserve or extenuation, so that the little tangent was exaggerated into a very black and latent sin. That there should be no Mrs. Hempel to soften her resolution she wrote the letter of dismissal immediately, and made

a packet of the few gifts he had made her—very few they were, because he knew her ultra-refinement in her objection to jewellery—posted packet and letter, and then returned and told her friend.

That generous lady wept over the breaking of the engagement as if it had been the death of a child, and then incontinently abused her friend.

‘The weeping broomstick!’ she said savagely—‘always making eyes at men and drenching herself with scent. Oh! I do believe that that woman is never satisfied unless she’s being tempted. Eve gave herself the apple, I’m sure. There never was any serpent.’

‘Oh, it’s no use talking, dear. He forgot me. Did I ever forget him—did I for one hour?’

‘No, dear, I don’t think you did.’

‘I never did. And then he writes to me that it all happened because he was miserable through always thinking of me. That must be false. Why, I always thought of him, and it made me glad—always. To know he was going on so well, to know he was fighting and beating the other men. Oh! I was proud and glad—glad always. But it doesn’t matter now; nothing matters now.’

‘Don’t fret so. It was only a flirtation.’

‘Only a flirtation! How if it had been me? Only a flirtation! If *I* had flirted he would have killed me, and he would have been quite right.’

‘My dear—my dear! If everybody were to be killed for flirting, there’d only be you and me left on earth—and I’m not sure about myself.’

‘It’s no use being flippant, May—and I hate it.’

‘. . . Oh, these men! . . . Just imagine anybody

telling a stupid lie like that—that he flirted because he was so lonely without me!’ She laughed almost hysterically, though there was no trace of hysteria in her perfect system. ‘He loved me so much that he had to flirt with another woman! He’s all a lie—a lie that breathes, and eats, and drinks, and walks!’

‘Stralie, Stralie! this is madness!’

‘Everything that is quite honourable and quite true is mad in this awful world, I think. . . . I am strong, and proud, and true, and he seemed so. . . . May, I wouldn’t have wronged him by a thought for all the world.’

‘I know, dear—I know. But men are different.’

‘To love single-heartedly—is it too much to ask? Why, we women are really the strong natures.’

‘You’ve never been tempted, Stralie.’

‘Tempted! I wouldn’t be, unless I loved, and then it isn’t temptation, because it needn’t be fought. It’s the loveless sins that are horrible.’

‘Men are like little puppies, Stralie—good in the main, but ready to run off the track after every bird in the bush.’

‘Supposing *we* did?’

‘Some of us do, dear—Mrs. Millenet, for instance.’

‘Oh, that woman! But he’s worse. He had me and my letters, and they couldn’t keep him.’

‘He hasn’t done much harm beyond being found out!’

‘Oh, May, don’t make me hate you! That worldly cant! It’s the being found out that makes the offence not so bad. He has told me all, and I could almost forgive him if he hadn’t written that lie.’

‘You expect too much from men, dear.’

'I don't. Surely the ideal is always possible. I live up to my own ideals.'

'I don't to mine.'

'You do. You think you haven't any, but you have ; you live up to them unconsciously.'

'I haven't any, really, Stralie.'

'I live up to mine ; most women do. What makes most women better than most men ? My mother told me that a man can do bad things, and get so used to them, that without shame he can think how much better his women-folk are than himself.'

'How did she know that ?'

'She knew,' said Stralie bitterly. 'She had to know. She was one of the best women that ever breathed, and my father was one of the worst men.'

'And yet she loved him, Stralie.'

'I know she did—poor mother ! Bad as he was, he respected her a little, although he was exacting.'

'Like them all, my dear, excepting Will, and I think Frank Abbey : take all there is and give as little as they can.'

'She said that he said to her once, "I am a bad lot, and you're the best ;" and he said that "She was Lucrece to all others and Thais to him."'

'Every good woman is that to some man, Stralie.'

'Every other woman might be ; I wouldn't. I'd keep my reserve even to Geo— to the man I loved.'

'You're like a child explaining the stars.'

She broke down then.

'Oh, May, I can't talk. My heart is not broken—it's dead. I can't feel anything any more.'

'You shall drink some wine and go to bed, and to-morrow we'll forgive Mr. Gifford by telegram.'

But next day brought the news that the Premier of Victoria was co-respondent in a divorce action, and that all the Ministry were opposed by nominees of the Social Purity League; and Stralie turned her face to the wall, old memories and new, fluent and refluent, and prayed to the God of her mother—not that death might save her from the pangs of life, but that youth might go and maturity teach her indifference.

CHAPTER XXVI

‘When the cook and the steward fall out, the captain hears who stole the butter.’

GIFFORD waited in the city, whose every pave and brick he now hated, until Stralie’s letter and packet came to him, and the second explained the first before he had read it. So it was all over.

‘Dead finish it is,’ said he, and laughed humorlessly. Then he was filled with rage at the position. Everything gone—power, love; only life left him, and life seemed utterly valueless. There was his mother certainly, but mothers are only for men when they can feel like children; and he respected his mother as he respected Stralie, and so was ashamed to meet her.

Stralie had dismissed him, but Helen Millenet loved him: he could believe nothing else. As he had been saddled with blame, he would deserve it. He and Helen would leave the country, and let the people who had forced them to the step bear the consequence.

White for revenge on Millenet, he drove to Millenet’s house. When he was announced, Mrs. Millenet at first thought of denying herself to him, and then curiosity outweighed all other considerations, and she prepared to meet him.

He entered the room of the tragic comedy of a few

weeks before, and as soon as the servant had closed the door, strode to the mistress, and put his arm around her in significance of possession. She struggled for a moment, but very faintly, and then decided to stay where she was—but only for a moment.

‘Helen, we’re both disgraced! Let us go away together.’

Her ready emotions brought tears to her eyes with their usual facility, and she freed herself.

‘Oh, no! we can’t be disgraced. My husband is doing this to frighten me.’

‘He is not, Helen. I know from my own lawyers that he will force the law to the bitter end. Let us go away together. Why stay to face disgrace?’

‘Oh, I can’t! I can’t!’

‘You shall. You’ve made me sell my soul, and you shall pay me the price.’

He took her roughly in his arms again, maddened by the light way she regarded the wreck she had caused. She had not been used to anything so real, and his vehemence frightened her; so that, with a lithe strength few would have suspected, she twisted like an eel, and was out of his embrace and two paces away almost before he knew it.

‘You mustn’t talk so horribly. I didn’t make you sell your soul. What should I want with anybody’s soul? I——’

He had caught her again.

‘Helen, I’m alone. You caused it. I have lost Stralie. I shall have you. I’ve bought you, and I’ve paid for you.’

‘Oh no! no! Oh, what madness!’

‘Your husband will never be reconciled to you. He’s done with you for ever.’

She half thought it might be so, and immediately she knew she was in danger of losing the husband she had always plagued and half-despised he became superlatively dear to her.

‘Oh, don’t say that. I love him so.’

‘You what?’ said Gifford, aghast.

‘I love him—I’ve always loved him. Do you think I could ever have loved you? My husband is the best man in the whole world, and he won’t speak to me. What’s the use of your standing there like a silly? You don’t understand me; nobody understands me, except Henry.’

Gifford’s face was very white: Judas, half repenting the betrayal, now forced to recognise that the silver of the bribe was counterfeit.

‘You Jezebel!’ he said. ‘You’re lower than the women of the streets!’

She began to sob, and as he turned to leave without again glancing at her, she hurled a crushing retort:

‘You’re a cad—a cad, and no gentleman! and I’ll—I’ll never speak to you again.’

She probably expected him to fall dead under the threat, but he walked away unharmed.

After he had left the house she lay on the pink-flowered settee and cried a little, and thought and schemed for half an hour; then suddenly smiled and nodded to herself. She heard the noise of wheels, listened for a moment, and heard her husband’s voice, trotted to the piano, and ran her fingers along the keys, saying to herself:

‘It’s lucky I learned that other song since Henry stopped speaking to me.’

She heard his voice in the hall, fixed a ‘Ring the bell,

watchman ' gaze on the convenient vase, imported tears into her voice, and sang very softly :

'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean—
Tears from the depth of some divine despair.'

There was the velvet sound of a footfall on the thick carpet, and she turned her head, but so slightly that it was unnoticeable to the man behind her, who sighed. She sang a bar or two more in that soft little voice of hers ; and then, half histrionically, half naturally—or apparently naturally, for she could make herself believe anything or feel anything at will—she crashed out the last chord with the loud pedal hard down, dropped her arms, folded, on the piano, laid her head on her arms, and broke into heart-rending sobs.

The finicky brain of the statistics maniac thought the pity that his little formula of a heart felt. He crossed the room, placed his hand on the bent neck—an adorable neck, with little golden curls on it, most kissable—lost the politician in the man, was stirred in his small affections by the love which had been obsolescent for so long, and said, in his little voice, raspy with suppressed emotion :

'You mustn't cry, really. It will make you quite ill.'

She sobbed out : 'Oh, Henry ! do speak to me a l-l-little bit. I'm so miserable. And I have really done nothing—only been foolish.'

'If I could be sure—if I could be sure.'

'Oh, Henry, you may ! That Gifford man was here just now.'

'He dared ?'

'Y-yes. He'd dare anything. He's an awful man !

He wouldn't go away, although I ordered him out of the house!' (Sniff.) 'He stayed there and said he loved me, and he'd die if I didn't go away with him.'

'The scoundrel!'

'Yes! And he threatened to kill me, and I was f-fif-firm; and then he went on his knees and said you would go on with the divorce, and I said I couldn't help that, but I'd never look at another man, because I l-l-loved you.'

He spoke very sadly, showing more quiet depth of feeling than he had himself suspected.

'You don't love me, Helen?'

'Oh, I do! I do!'

She put her hand on his, and, after a little struggling with pride, he allowed it to fall into his open palm.

'Are you telling the truth, Helen?'

She carried the war into the enemy's camp, raising the siege by capturing the city.

'I will swear it to you—now, now if you like.'

'Don't swear anything, Helen.'

'I'll do anything you say, Henry. And you know how neglectful you've been—always at the House or your office. And I was so lonely without you, and I amused myself talking to these men, and no thought of harm.'

'And you never loved Gifford?'

'How could I, Henry? how could I? He could never understand me; nobody could understand me but you.'

He looked at her long, well-kept, pink hand as it lay in his own short, brown, soft, and rather fleshy palm—the hand of an artist or a liar in the hand of a stubborn myopic precisian—and felt himself giving way at the

mere contemplation of the contrast. The marvellous strength in the marvellous weakness of a woman's hand—force in softness, plenipotence in fragility! His weakness dominated him. He closed his hand on hers.

‘You do love me, Helen?’

‘Henry, I do, I do!’

He kissed her, and she knew that she had won. For a long time to come there would be no eye-rolling and philandering for her. The few weeks under the shadow of the Divorce Court had given her an almost mortal right; Gifford had completed the rout. Her husband found her strangely submissive, never half contemptuously opposing his simplest statement of opinion, as of old. And they bade fair to be happy; for she would never again go over the boundary of indiscretion into imprudence; and he—once his suspicions were stilled—saw nothing, and heard nothing: the ideal husband of the flippant wife—fond, deaf, and blind.

CHAPTER XXVII

‘Cull me love’s roses in the hour approved,
When who so loves may hope to be beloved.’

GIFFORD knew of the reconciliation a day or two later, when his solicitors advised him of the probable abandonment of the proceedings in divorce, and three days thereafter Millenet joined the Cabinet of Cincinnatus Hoggins as Treasurer, and divided his happiness thereafter between his adoring wife and the fearsome statistics of his office.

A month later Gifford, seeking nepenthe in Daven’s murderous alluvial mine near Korringajork, read that Hoggins had resigned the premiership in favour of Millenet. At last all the spoils had gone to the real victor. Gifford smiled bitterly, but said no word.

At Coocooroo, where the drought daily became more hopeless, Stralie passed the weeks in mental torpor, by gradual habit forgetting to suffer keenly, although any little accident brought back the memory of her recreant lover to her as a sailor feels the brewing gale at an old wound. Sometimes she chid herself for wrecking her happiness by making her sense of honourable dealing so inflexible, and then she chid the soft-heartedness that caused the first chiding.

Abbey came oftener than in the days when her

engagement to Gifford had been active. Mrs. Hempel had prompted his more frequent visits, that by-and-by grew to be nightly, and that by-and-by were watched for anxiously by Stralie, so eager was she for distraction and so thirsty for forgetfulness.

He talked the usual gossip of the camp of Darby: of the way the money was being spent by the company on foolish work; of shafts costing ten thousand pounds being sunk behind lodes; of the general manager having developed a marvellous laziness, and an unpleasant habit of making the sites of new shafts and works carelessly on a plan not drawn to scale; and all the other errors which were principally funny here, although they were tragic on the Stock Exchange.

One day he found her weeping, and was so grieved thereby that he could offer only incoherencies as comfort.

‘There! there! Oh, don’t cry, dear! It will be all right—everything will be all right.’

In an unguarded moment he laid a sympathetic hand on hers; but she was petulant—for probably the third time in her life—and threw his hand from her.

‘It isn’t all right, and I don’t want it to be all right. How dare you say that I want it to be all right again!’

He reddened and stammered, and so put himself deeper in the wrong.

‘Who told you that I don’t want it to be all wrong, always? Who told you?’

‘Mrs. Hempel said——’

‘Mrs. Hempel said? You talk about me? You’re all spying on me. Go away. I never want to see you again!’

She had ordered him to go, but, to cut short the

embarrassment, she left him and went to her own room, and the abashed Abbey sought Mrs. Hempel, told her of his unfortunate interview, and concluded by asking helplessly :

‘How did I do wrong? I always make a mess of it with her.’

‘How did you do wrong?’ echoed Mrs. Hempel pityingly. ‘You’re a blunderer, Frank. Why did you tell her it would be all right? You know you want it to stay all wrong.’

‘I don’t—really I don’t. When I saw how ill and worried she was, I wanted it to be all right.’

‘You did?’

‘I did, honestly.’

‘Well, I give you up. I thought I knew men—I don’t. Catch a woman playing that self-abnegation trick!’

‘Plenty of them do.’

‘They’re not my friends, Frank, anyway. Now, next time you mustn’t mention anything about it being all right, or all wrong, either. You must never mention the past. Talk about the future—with a little insinuation of Frank Abbey in the future.’

‘But I won’t have a chance of speaking to her again. She distinctly told me she would never see me again.’

‘Did she—distinctly?’

‘Yes, absolutely. She said——’

‘Never mind what she said: it was quite true, and she meant it. She will never see you again, to-day, but she will to-morrow.’

‘It’s too good to be true.’

‘It’s too true not to be good. Now, you stay away

till you're sent for. And if you're near the works hurry that husband of mine home.'

He shook hands and went into the garden, and, as he reached the gate she called after him, so lowly that he almost missed the words :

'And you may come to dinner—Thursday.'

'Oh, thank you !'

'No thanks. You'll have a dull evening. There'll be nobody to meet you.' Her arch and merry face smiled at his uncertainty, and she added : 'Only Will and me, and Stralie and you.'

Abbey walked away on air. He found Hempel radiating energy, as usual—giving half a dozen orders with the one breath, snatching at his desk telephones, answering and ordering curtly the Main Range, Yeoman's Camp, Sulphur Creek, the traffic manager, the Flux Quarries, and Eclipse Corner, swearing under his breath if he were delayed a moment, but never finishing the oath, as he had not the time for it, his thin, dark throat convulsed with quick words.

'Sit down, Frank. I'm just through with that—only a few letters to sign.'

His few letters were about two score. He had dictated them, certainly ; but he was one of those free horses whose temperaments spur themselves. He left nothing to the underlings beyond the mechanical type-writing, and so he read them at lightning speed, and scrawled the hieroglyph that was his signature in a second or so. And while he read and signed he talked.

'You ought to be general manager permanently, Will,' said Abbey admiringly.

'Eh? No, thanks. Acting G.M.'s good enough for me. There's squalls coming.'

‘Worse than before?’

‘Before? Before was only a breeze. Coocooroo’s a blue duck.’

‘No!’

‘It is. The G.M. took a good time to be ill and get his six months’ leave.’

‘Wasn’t he really ill, then?’

‘Course he was. . . . Mum, ’m, ’m, yours faithf’ly—there, read it if you can. . . . Course he was. But what was he ill of? Ill of himself—sick of the job. Wasn’t lead-poisoning—bet your life.’

‘Well, who said it was?’

‘I said it wasn’t. That lead furnace has never been kept going long enough to poison a canary. . . . ’M, ’m, ’m. Coke freights. ’M, ’m. . . . No: the G.M. was a good man turned fool. Got led away by his pets. That idiot Fenton as a mine manager! Gr-r-r-r.’

‘And do you think the G.M. at last recognised the show was in Queer Street?’

‘Course he did! He only woke up a month before he cleared. And when he found what fools he had been petting and trusting to, he came to me like a man, and, says he, “I’ve recommended you as acting general manager, and I want to tell you I’m sorry I snubbed you. I was misled.”’

‘Very cool of him. Didn’t you tell him that a man at his screw was paid not to be misled?’

‘No, thanks, I didn’t! Why, the man was as miserable as a Jew in hell without his cashbox; otherwise, I wouldn’t have taken the job on. Why, there’s Fenton: he’s under me now, and he had a bigger screw at first, and a bigger job. Course he hates me. And that traffic manager tries to be cheeky when I ’phone him,

because he thinks he ought to be acting G.M. Me? I say nothing—and saw wood.'

He 'sawed wood' with his pen, triumphantly scrawling his unrecognisable signature to three letters in two seconds each, and then continued:

'Poor old Johnson! It was a case of sure auto-toxin—the man's worry poisoned his body. He got Bright's disease out of his thoughts.'

A telephone-bell sounded. He snatched at the one labelled 'Mines manager,' and held a suave conversation for a minute with that most excellent hater, Fenton.

'Directors coming here soon, Frank. Wouldn't be s'prised at any rate. They've got to do something, although they don't want to. It's hard to find a courageous man in this game.'

'M, 'm?'

'M, 'm, 'm! They always want to break things gently. As if you could fall gently off the top of a two-hundred-foot smoke-stack! Break things gently! My stars! when they get to hell they'll ask for the temperature to be reduced to ninety for a start.'

'You're quite satisfied they'll go to hell, old man?'

'Dead sure. The tricks that crowd has played! Man! they've known where we are for the last two months, and the shareholders don't know it yet, although there's a few of the public suspicious. The shareholders don't know, and yet the market's dropping. Who's doing it? Why, the local directors don't know yet, but all the Melbourne directors do. And Berkshire is selling: I'll lay a worm or two on that. When the cat's out of the bag the public 'ull eat the directors—that is, if it's a decent public. And

yet they ask the exposure to be toned down. They only want to put things off; it's quite natural to them. They're nearly all Free-Traders, and they'd rather drift than row.'

'And is the position so bad, Will?'

'Look here. I'd tell nobody in the world but you, except my wife. She'd coax a periwinkle out of his shell on to a hot grid; but she only tells Stralie, and I trust Stralie. She's a jewel, that girl.'

Abbey flushed all over with pride at the praise of her.

'We've got a very fine railway, haven't we, and a good reduction plant? But we've got damned little ore that's anything like payable.'

'Is it as bad as that?'

'Is it? I'm telling you. We made a hard bargain with you for your ore, didn't we?'

'You did.'

'All bluff. We had to have that ore at your price if necessary. I tell you that, because the deal is ancient history, and you've sold your show. And if I weren't working for this crowd, and hadn't some kind of a cursed silly pride about going true to my salt, I'd sell a "bear" of Coocooroos.'

Abbey left him soon after, with the obsession of Stralie not dissipated, but temporarily dimmed by an accession of man's other desire of possession—that of gain; and between the new hope of the girl that Mrs. Hempel had given him and the hope of profit that Hempel had unconsciously suggested he was very happy and occupied.

He was a slow man, so he did nothing in the way of speculation for three days, and on the second of these he went to dinner at Hempel's and sat next to

Stralie, who spoke to Mrs. Hempel and her husband a great deal and to Abbey very little.

After dinner Hempel said he had brought some work home and would be busy till ten o'clock, and ten minutes after his departure Mrs. Hempel fidgeted a great deal, and finally said she must really see that Will was comfortable. Without waiting for reply or approval she left them on the veranda, and was solicitous of her husband's comfort for two hours.

CHAPTER XXVIII

‘Love grows with obstacles.’

THE embarrassed Abbey sat there with the stonily-cold woman looking to the garden, the show place of Coocooroo through all the three years of drought, because the company’s dams irrigated it. The scents of the garden rose to them mingled with the smells of the night ; an ethereal perfume that did not seem to be of the baked earth, and did seem to be flooded from the stars.

Abbey blundered as usual, but she had over-punished herself for her treatment of him, and the blunder was fortunate.

‘I hope you’ll say you’ve forgiven me for annoying you the other night, Stralie,’ he said, with the humility usual to him whenever he spoke to her.

‘I have nothing to forgive, Mr. Abbey. You are always kind, and I was bad-tempered. And then she thought, with one of the pangs that were now so familiar, that Gifford, if he had offended her, would have forgotten all about it, and have greeted her with a smile—nay, would have taken her in his arms, and made her forgive him, although neither of them would have mentioned the offence. Abbey’s way of opening his campaign with apologies seemed to her like the half-cowardly courtesy of a weak investing army to an

impregnable city—offering sweetmeats when arquebuse and culverin had failed. Most humans—man or woman, but especially woman—love to be swept off their feet in matters of business and love. The weaker the woman, the greater the desire to be taken by storm.

Words failed Abbey, and the two looked into the obscurity of the garden below them. Stralie put her hand on the long arm-rest of the lounge on the side nearest to Abbey, and in a moment, but very stealthily, he covered the hand with his own. She allowed him a moment and then withdrew the hand, and he was seized with a momentary petulance. He said, half sadly, half in annoyance:

‘Stralie, will you never love me?’

‘Never.’

‘Never, Stralie?’

‘I don’t think ever, Frank.’

‘You love him just the same?’

She paused for a moment, her lip quivering, her eyes tear-blinked in the welcomingly obscuring night.

‘Yes, Frank.’

‘Why do you love him?’

‘How can I tell?’

Abbey’s love became jealousy, and jealousy of a very weak and puerile kind.

‘Is he better looking than I am?’

‘No; I think you’re the better-looking man.’

‘Is it because he’s black-haired like yourself?’

‘No; and I don’t really like black hair. Fair should go to dark, too.’

‘I know he’s cleverer than I am. Is that it?’

‘No. At first I was in love with his quick ways, and because he was so much alive and all the other men

around him looked dead ; but what's the use ? He is he, and you are you. That's all, Frank.'

'Will it never be different, Stralie ? I've always loved you. I haven't cared for anything since you were engaged to Gifford until it was broken off. My sleep's no good to me.'

'I'm very sorry, Fr—Mr. Abbey. It can't be helped, and it doesn't matter. Nothing matters in this world.'

'You mustn't say that. Everything matters. You don't think that I'm going to wreck my life even if I don't get you.'

'I hope not, Mr. Abbey ;' but she looked at him with a new respect.

'I'll swear not. Because a man can't get the best woman in the world he ought not to prove he wasn't fit for her by going to the devil. I'd keep your respect if I couldn't get you.'

They were silent again, she thinking of the ideal man Gifford would have been, with his own volcanic strength and enthusiastic imagination allied to Abbey's sober sense of responsibility, and immediately she had thought this she rejected the ideal she had imagined for the human she knew. Then even Gifford's faults were very dear to her.

Abbey rose rather sulkily to say good-bye, disappointed with the evening he had so looked forward to, chagrined at this most decisive baffling, annoyed that all the things he had rehearsed and intended to say had remained unsaid, and that they had not talked of themselves, but of the absent and the recreant.

He showed his discomfiture so plainly that her heart smote her for the apparently wanton cruelty, and she tried to soften to him ; but all she could say as they shook hands was of his rival—doubly a rival now, it seemed,

because he had no rights. 'Why should I make all my friends unhappy?' And before he could reply, she had asked him to leave her. Fearful of again blundering, he took a precipitous departure down the bungalow steps, prowled like a homeless puppy around the house to Hempel's little study, saw that Mrs. Hempel was not there, and entered.

'Hallo, Frank! Have a whisky?'

'Yes, old man.'

'Help yourself.'

'Thanks. Here's luck!'

'Nother million a year to you! Luck yourself.'

'S luck!'

'How goes it on the veranda?'

'No good at all, Bill.'

They smoked for ten minutes in silence, and Abbey rose to go home.

'Off so early? Don't feel good?'

'No, old chap.'

'News of the unfavourable developments of the Australia Field caused Frank Abbey's stock to relapse to tuppence sellers?' said Hempel in the jargon of the share market.

'Something like that, old man. . . . Good-night.'

Abbey reached his house long before ten, but he had recently shifted his quarters, and his code-book was mislaid, so that midnight was passed before he had coded a cable to his brokers instructing them to sell a 'bear' of Coocooros till further notice. If his heart was soft, his head was hard.

'Stralie's not mercenary,' he thought; 'but I've never heard of a woman refusing a man because he had money; and if I can't have the girl, I may as well have the loot.'

CHAPTER XXIX

‘Honour and profit will not keep in the one sack.’

GIFFORD stayed in Melbourne and showed himself about the city, as if in defiance of that public opinion that believes it decent for the beaten to go into hiding, and admires the defeated who refuse to hide. There were strange rumours against the soundness of the big company at Coocooroo, but feeling secure in his faith in the general manager, principally because that gentleman enjoyed a princely salary and paid the wages of bishops to his departmental heads, and also because the rumours were merely rumours, which are three-quarters lies, he dismissed the croakers lightly.

Graham and Gifford were still his friends, so, indeed, were all his one-time following; but he was out of the game, and the men who are still fighting, no matter how warm their hearts may be, have little time to think of the already fallen. Berkshire passed him with a cold nod. As he had been friendly when Gifford was in power because of his fear of Gifford now he resented the fear by cutting its cause.

Partly from fear of further scandal, Millenet, although really reconciled to his wife, allowed the suit to be forgotten without publicly withdrawing it. It was not until many weeks later that Gifford, who had joined

Daven on his hopeless alluvial mine, that had gold, but had malevolently killed many men just as they were putting forth their hands to grasp it, saw a small paragraph in the smallest type in an obscure portion of a newspaper, to the effect that the following suits were withdrawn, and read his own name and Millenet's in the 'following suits.' Then, with something like a resurrection of the hope of youth, he wrote to Stralie, saying that surely she would forgive, the alleged crime being now proven at its worst an empty flirtation.

The letter despatched, he was almost happy, drowning his suspense in hard labour, working double tides, below and on the brace, keeping his feet from freezing in the slurry and mine water by harder work; cutting timber in the Bush, amid a forest of perfume, the early wattle shaking its scented gold upon his head and shoulders at every step.

Their reef drives were well ahead, and they were rising to the wash the day that brought the mail that brought Stralie's letter. Gifford lived at Daven's house, Mrs. Daven's dislike having softened to an exaggerated courtesy, and the three were at table when the mail came in.

Gifford, with a hurried 'Excuse me,' tore open the letter, and read the ratification of his dismissal.

'You seem to think that, because all this shameful business is not carried to extremities, I can take you back with all my faith in you as fresh as ever, but I can't. You had your work, your ambition, and me. When I had your letters it seemed as if you were with me, talking to me; and all the time you were flirting with this woman. You could kiss her, and then go to

the House and write to me as if you were really true, and had not one dishonest thought. I loved you because I had faith in you; but when faith goes, love goes.'

She had looked at those last words again and again, wondering why she should send them, knowing them to be a lie, for she loved him still. Faith! respect! What did they matter? Love mattered all, and she knew it. The rest was only a sop to her pride, or, more rightly, a concession to her own high sense of honour. Where instinct wars with education, education is trampled underfoot, except in the case of the old and the cold, who are old and cold because their instincts are asleep or dying. And all her instincts cried out for her lover, all the primitive woman in her wanted him in the end, as at night on seeking sleep the acquired falls off like a discarded garment, and the heart, as naked as the body, admits to itself the truth of itself.

Yet at the last time of regarding the half-lie her face hardened, though her eyes were soft, and she said passionately: 'I don't care; I meant it when I wrote it,' closed the letter and let it go.

Gifford read it twice very calmly, and looked up to reply to Daven, who had asked kindly: 'Good news, George?'

The cruel young woman had risen to look over Daven's letters. She put one shapely arm around his shoulders and brought her head close to his, apparently attempting to read, but really only angling for a kiss. She had this carelessly cruel habit very strongly, it seemed to Gifford. She was continually waylaying her husband at doors and calling him into the kitchen,

ostensibly to criticise the cooking, but really to make love to him, as sundry kisses, some of them loud as the crack of a whip-lash, testified immediately.

Now, as she leaned on her husband, she was radiant and warm with love, and at last looked, cruelly it seemed, out of her happiness at Gifford, so that he felt the letter the more, and rose from the table, saying as he did so that the letter was only on business.

He left the house and walked into the bush, where the wattles made the earth of one hue, gold, and the sky-blue and the blossom composed a symphony. The serried ranks of colour climbed the hills, and flanked the spurs from mountain-top to creek. He threaded his way between the hundreds of shallow shafts of a dead generation of diggers, and found a grass-covered dump, and lay flat down on it, and looked to the sky, and wished the grasses and the bush might grow over him then and there.

He had never felt the need of her so much as at this hour. The baby nuzzling the strange pillow to find the smell of the breast of the mother who is gone; the child lost in the streets of a great city; the maniac in his moments of lucidity craving for the someone he loved before he had lost his cunning and was found to be mad; the poor prisoner in his cell closing his ears to his own anguish, knowing that the beloved of him may starve or die, while he rots there, immured and impotent; the chained bullock lusting for the milk-bush that grows a thousand miles away from the yoke—all these hungers Gifford understood by the knowledge of his own thirst.

So it was all over—that black time that comes to all men who can superlatively feel, when youth, that

seemed so immortal yesterday, is not here to-day, having died in the night. He idly opened the newspaper that he had unconsciously brought with him from the table, and there read that Cincinnatus Hoggins, the stop-gap Premier and Knight, had resigned, and that Millenet reigned in his stead.

The defeat was perfect and the rout complete. Power gone, honour gone, love gone, friends gone! No, not the friend. He saw his Damon coming through the aisles of bloom, and he sat up. Daven advanced, an anxious gleam in his eyes.

‘What’s up, old man? Bottom fallen out of Coocooroos?’

‘No, old man; they look better, if anything. But I’m at Dead Finish. Read that.’

Daven seated himself beside Gifford, read the letter, handed it back, and commented slowly:

‘It looks like turning you down.’

Gifford laughed bitterly.

‘Looks like! It is. It’s all over.’

‘I don’t think so, George. Go and see her.’

‘I daren’t, after hurting her as I have done. And what’s the use?’

‘All the use. Go and see her, and she’ll forgive you.’

‘Not she. You don’t know her, Jack.’

‘I know women.’

‘Eh?’

Daven reddened.

‘Well, I know one, and what’s true of one good one is true of another good one, just as what’s true of one bad un is true of another bad un.’

‘They’re all different; it’s no use generalizing.’

'Isn't it? Do you think I could be taken in by another flopper? Not much!'

'What's a flopper?'

Daven replied confusedly: 'Graham called Mrs. Millenet the flopper.'

'Oh!'

'Take my advice, old man. You go to her and take her in your arms, and she'll cry a bit, and take you back again, and make more of you than ever. They all do.'

'You don't know Stralie, Jack.'

'Well, I do—a bit. But you're wrong in staying away from her. If you were with her she wouldn't have time to think, only to feel.'

'It's no good talking, Jack; you don't know her.'

'If she had any sense of humour all this foolishness would be laughed to death. The whole Millenet affair was a farce.'

'But if she thought me ridiculous instead of insincere, it might be worse.'

'She's different to any other woman, then?'

'She is,' said Gifford sadly, but with all the pride of a lover's vanity in the girl that is his, because she is his.

'We all say that. But you're a fool if you give her any more time to think. Don't give 'em time; call 'em gently to a cliff and talk nice, and while they're thinking you're not such a bad chap, pull 'em over and catch 'em and kiss 'em till they're well.'

'It's all very well for you, Jack; you've got your girl.'

'And you could have yours by taking her. Is Miss Field a tricky girl, now?'

'Don't say that again.'

'Well, she isn't; I'm arguing for her. And not being

tricky, you can't think she can be in love one day and out of it the next.'

'No, I can't—bless her!'

'Well, go to her, say, "Look here, I'm a bad lot; I'm not good enough to be found dead in your paddock." And then she'll kick up a row with you for running yourself down.'

'No, I won't go near her. I've mortally insulted her. You don't know her, Jack.' But neither did Gifford—quite.

Daven left him and sought his wife.

'Luce, poor old George is in a bad way.'

'The letter was from Miss Field.'

'Why, how did you know?'

She pursed her lips, nodded thrice, and looked wise.
'I knew.'

'Well, she's given him up altogether.'

'And serve him glad.'

'Don't be harsh, Luce. You don't look nice when you're severe. It wasn't his fault.'

'Wasn't his fault that he ran away with Mrs. Millenet?'

'Now, you know he didn't run away, and you know that Millenet has made it up with his wife.'

'More shame to him! But I never thought he was a man.'

'Anyway, it wasn't Gifford's fault. Why, the woman got hold of Graham, and——'

She turned on him, a little red-haired fury, her eyes flashing, and her very white skin flushing to the colour of her hair.

'What?'

He continued lamely: 'She tried to get hold of me—'

now, you know she did. Don't be nasty! Haven't I always cared for you? Give me a kiss.'

'Will you swear to me you told me everything?'

'Yes, I swear. I did tell you everything, now didn't I? And didn't I tell you immediately it had occurred?'

'Ye-es, you did. And you never cared for her, did you, Jack?'

'Now, now, this is going too far. Haven't I told you a dozen times that I don't care any more for the woman than I do for her husband?'

'Yes, you did. Well, kiss me.'

'Not till you promise never to bother me again about the woman, or any other woman.'

'Won't I—if I have cause.'

'Well, not about Mrs. Millenet any more, then. I'll see that there are no others.'

'I promise, then.'

'And you promise to be real friendly to my mate. He's lost his girl, so don't you be so nasty and polite.'

'I promise. Kiss me.'

They kissed silently and walked from the kitchen; but in the dining-room the arms of this impulsive little bundle of nerves and curves, and white skin and Titianesque hair flashed round his neck, and she kissed him again.

Gifford, who had come to the veranda, heard a crack as of a whip-lash, looked down the track for a driver and to the scrub for a whip-bird, saw neither; glanced at the house, understood, and smiled.

CHAPTER XXX

‘As soon as the pauper had filled his belly, said he : “We must make laws to protect our property.”’

BERKSHIRE, immediately his possessions passed the fifty thousand pounds mark, had found him a conscience of the convenient kind that works only when it is told, and goes to heel like a well-trained dog when so instructed. He was no orator, but long practice had so accustomed him to the sound of his own platitudes that while speaking he thought he had a silken tongue, and was as self-deceived therein as he was when he believed that the tongue of silk was not actuated by a brain of rodent’s cunning and a heart of hemp.

Graham, as leader of the Opposition, had proposed an Electoral Reform Bill to provide for universal suffrage, and Berkshire’s secretary wrote for his principal a speech reviewing the history of the franchise from the invention of the plebiscite down to the French Revolution ; and Berkshire, as of old, breathed heavily and lost the place in his notes, and couldn’t find it again, and was forced to trust to his own marvellous eloquence in pleading for the continuance of a vote for thrift. He believed with all the sincere insincerity that was characteristic of the man that a vote for manhood only would bring national suicide ; he thought with all his unthinking brain that the landowner who had stolen or dum-

mied his land from the Government by all sorts of chicanery and evasion of the law, and the begging farmer who spent half his life in whining to the Government for lower railway freights, free seed-wheat, and free manure, and the other half in growing the unnecessary pumpkin, were better citizens than the landless artisans of the city, or even the miners; there being a deep-rooted superstition in his class of politician that pumpkins and sheep are wealth, and that boots and gold are not. He waxed almost tearful in his attempted picture of Australia without a landed gentry, and then he looked at his arm's-length-held notes again, gasped, and subsided.

His application for two months' leave of absence from Parliamentary duties immediately following on this, was a surprise to Graham, and, preceded as it had been by rumours against the stability of Coocooroo, it had the effect of strengthening the rumours. Graham wrote of it to Gifford and to Daven, and the two mates were half uneasy, half inclined to laugh away the trouble and trust to the genius that must always surround the man of princely salary. Then the stock began to fall, not by pence, but by shilling and half-crown stages, and they thought that one of them must go to see Coocooroo and its condition, and that it would be time enough to make the choice 'to-morrow.'

But by 'to-morrow' their minds were made up for them by a tragedy. There was another run in their treacherous mine, more unfortunate than the earlier ones, because they had mined rich wash, and had started the puddling machine—a tragedy for one man who had worked too late to escape, and now lay a hundred feet below, choked in the slurry.

The 'Butcher's Shop' was keeping up its reputation

as a man slaughterer, but, with the usual stoicism of the miner, Daven prepared to resume work as soon as the mine had been cleared and the body of the martyr to progress recovered. Then did his wife coax and bully and plead and threaten without avail; then did she cunningly show that the path to glory and to gain led to a visit to Coocooroo, where at the least they would get some satisfaction and put an end to long suspense; and when the voice of the charmer sang this tune, Daven listened and was almost vanquished.

‘But this show is payable, Luce; and there is no danger, if we are careful.’

‘I don’t care whether it is payable or not,’ said Mrs. Daven, growing hot again. ‘I’ve heard of a woman’s baby being born just when the husband was killed, and I think you’re cruel——’

‘Now, now, don’t you fret! I’ll do anything for you. But the mine’s good.’

‘It will kill you just as it’s killed other men.’

‘What shall I do with it?’

‘Sell your share to Mr. Gifford.’

‘And give my mate the chance of being killed? Just like a woman!’

‘Well, float it, then.’

Daven stroked her hair.

‘Yes, I might do that. I *will* do it—there.’

There was another imitation of a whip-crack, and the two were happy again, Daven even quite light-hearted at the idea of selling the mine to strangers. It might kill the strangers, or their men; but Daven did not think of that. His was the true—the human—way of considering the man he did not know. No man can help another to die; no man is his brother’s keeper

unless he loves his brother. No man can balk his fate, though he may modify it. Each for himself and his beloved—it is the law of life.

They called Gifford, and asked him of his opinion of the decision, and he assented as he assented to everything—without interest or criticism. But he became the old, eager, impulsive Gifford when they talked of the untoward appearance of the market for Coocooroos, and proposed the visit to the fields. He was all for going hot-foot to the coast, and then to sea; but Daven showed him how the delay was as necessary as it was fretting. That day, for the first time since Stralie's telegram of inquiry had reached him, the meat he ate had a savour, and his sleep that night was as the sleep of a child. The prospect of seeing her again, even from a distance, was like wine to a starving man. He entered into the new work with a new energy, so that within a fortnight, when the spring was but half spent, they had floated the 'Butcher's Shop,' and transferred the lease, and handed over the management, and the train swung out north-east.

Daven purposely exaggerated the fatigues of the journey to his wife; but she coaxed, bullied, and pleaded, as usual, and was made one of the party.

But Berkshire had had two weeks' start of them, an advantage they discounted by travelling with the speed of youth, whereas Berkshire stopped at every five hundred miles for a day's rest, after the manner of age.

At every port the rumours of failure became more definite, and they travelled as quickly as they could, as if an hour could save them from ruin—these who had sown money on the sea, and watched it sink, saying, 'It will grow again next year.'

CHAPTER XXXI

‘Poverty is not exactly a crime, but it is a kind of roguery.’

GIFFORD and Daven left Mrs. Daven near the coast, but three thousand feet above it, in a queer little hotel perched by a river that suddenly came to a chasm, and threw its twenty chains wide of foaming water down eight hundred feet of cliff. The wild bananas jostled the tree-ferns under the high, far-reaching kauri and gum trees; the lawyer vines laced tree to tree, and swung liana and palm-frond from the topmost limb; a great rainbow, permanent as the day was long, straddled the haze below the falls; the gorge wandered—a serpent in diorite—to the tropic town, that smelled as if it were made of pineapples.

Daven’s wife did not allow him to go without the ceremony of detailed advice and lengthy exhortation, generally assuming that he had not lived before he married her, and that therefore he was an infant, who would set fire to his pinafore unless he remembered her motherly instructions. But at last, when he had sworn to return in three weeks at most, she allowed him to go, with this as a parting shot:

‘If you’re not here on the twenty-first, I’ll come and fetch you, Jack.’

Once away from the tropic growth of the sea fringe

and the jungle of the mountains, they saw the havoc of the drought—the tell-tale skeleton ; the grassless earth, like a ploughed field, where horses and cattle had dug despairingly with their hoofs for the sapless roots ; the old creek courses, that had not known rain for so long that they were mere deposits of knee-deep dust, ruffled by winds into hummocks and dunes. The mates and their horses were powdered alternately red and white—red from the alluvium of decomposed lime and iron, white from the gray soils turned to dust finer than flour—too fine to irritate the eye or grit upon the teeth when they bit it, but pungent as pepper, and pumiceous.

Then succeeded the beautiful freak of tropical scrub in that harsh and droughty land—of wild raspberries and sting-tree, and gum and cedar, and crow-foot elm. The roof of branches above looped and festooned, as if for a Roman feast, the vines putting out their cirrous fingers to take new holds, forcing a blossom like a white star from every extremity—a star that expanded in the sun, and melted in the dark to dew.

The railway had been completed to Coocooroo a month before, but Gifford and Daven loved the long openness too much to sacrifice it to the monotonous discomfort of a train, and they had taken the track with two good horses beneath them, and a pack-horse laden with camp gear pig-trotting ahead of them, as unwilling pilot to the hundred and fifty miles of open track before.

‘Good to be back again, Jack, isn’t it?’ said Gifford on the first night in camp, the violet night closing in on the flames of their fire, the great she-oaks in the empty creek ramparting them, funereal as cypresses.

‘Well enough,’ assented Daven indifferently for him.

The uxoriousness of the new-married man sat heavily upon him, and the parting had only been that very morning, which was five years away already.

Gifford understood, and was silent. The knowledge that a week more would take him to the place where Stralie lived had filled his blood with mingled impatience and content.

During the following days they had convincing demonstration of the truth of the market's despairing verdict. All the outside property they had sunk money in, on the strength of surface indications, had been developed into worse than forlorn hopes, and it was with little expectation that they approached Eclipse Corner, twenty miles from Coocooroo, and a mile from that marvellous tin deposit which should have made a semi-millionaire of Gifford more than a year ago.

The work of the long drought was shown them in the desolation of the country, that was green enough with scrub in normal seasons, although too rocky for rich grass-production at any time. The continent lay before them, a rolling fiery sand-hill, where once the little spinifex deserts had proclaimed the valuelessness of that land for man or beast; a greater horror had come, for even the desert was burned black. Its surface rose to the wind of a footfall like paper-ash; the porcupine spears of the spinifex lay in ash also—ash shaped like wire, which the wind tore into the impalpableness of flour.

They met many men, each with his weather-beaten swag and his dust-dyed water-bag, tramping in the endless search of work, and the search was the worst work, although unpaid for. This army rarely had a young recruit in it. Most of the men were grim, some

bitterly humorous, a few—(marvellous is the human when he bites upon the bullet, that he may not whimper for his manhood's sake; more marvellous when he refuses to feel his flogging, or to use the bullet, and goes on laughing)—generally light-hearted in their extremity, facing that hard-eyed prostitute, Fortune, and staring her out of countenance. These told all the same tale. Such and such a mine closed down for the drought; such and such a contract stopped till the drought broke up.

'Out at Coocooroo they thank God for the drought,' said one man, winking. 'It's a good excuse. All the floods in the world wouldn't give 'em payable copper. It's a pity we ain't farmers, with free land and seed-wheat from the Government. But we're miners, and we don't own any farms, and Government doesn't start subscription lists for us.'

'And rain seems as far off as ever?'

'Just as far off as it has been right through the last three years. There's a gin out at Coocooroo the niggers say is a rain-maker; but I think they're telling fairy tales to the whites to cadge tucker of 'em.'

'The monsoon's the best rain-maker, mate.'

'My oath! But if devilstick and prayin' 'll make a flood, you'll get it. There's a new parson at Coocooroo, and he's started prayin' for rain last Sunday.'

'You don't seem to think much of his chances.'

'Not me! I've slung it. I'm tramping to the coast. Course, he an' the gin might strike it lucky. I notice these fellows don't start prayin' till a drought's old enough to break up.'

He talked to Gifford and Daven for half an hour, and then camped and lunched with them, telling them

of the army of men haunting the parched deserts searching for work; how that this drought was general from Charleville to the Burdekin, and again to the Gulf, and from Aramac to the Diamantina; and finally left them, wondering how so much strength, knowledge, courage and humour, should seek for mere wages and find them not easily.

Rarely they saw any animal or vegetable life in all the dead country and bone-dry watercourses. Occasionally a stunted and tortuous tree existing somehow in the iron earth, and beneath it a grotesque, blear-eyed bullock, lunatic from long heat and cursed by a rare vitality that would not let him die. Skeletons half shrouded in dust lay wherever there had once been trees and shade, and no life, not even lizard life, attended these; but wherever the living waited for death the accursed crow perched near—a glossy fiend in black and water-grained silk—uttered his one word of menace, gluttony, cruelty, and self-gratulation, and waited for the end.

The bullock looked at his torturer; something of sanity came into his weary eyes. He lifted his head a little and ‘mooed’ faintly. It was his one protest against the capricious elements that had denied themselves to him—against the men who overloaded and overstocked the country in the fat seasons, providing no means of segregation or subsistence for the lean cattle in the lean years.

And here overworked Nature—who rarely makes a mistake—having been defrauded of her chances and eaten out of house and home, had done the best thing for the preservation of the country; killing some of the cattle by thirst after the cattle had eaten the grasses

out, so that some little seed might be left to make the earth green again after the rains came, and that the cattle might not increase until the grass had grown again to feed them. The suffering of the doomed herds was soon over; that of the men whose greed had partly done this thing had been long drawn out.

CHAPTER XXXII

A girl will draw more than a team of bullocks.

IN a creek two miles from Eclipse Corner—a creek squdgy all over, and boggy at the crossing by reason of a spring feeding it, and remaining faithful in this time of dryness—rested a bullock waggon, bogged almost to the bed. The team was still in the yokes, panting heavily from recent Titanic exertion, trying to brush off the flies from their reeking hides with stumpy tails that had been shortened by inoculation against tick-fever; the freest still lolling their tongues, and breathing so heavily that they were shaken from horn to hoof. The great waggon had once been painted blue, but the name on its panels—‘Rose of Australia’—in red, had been as continuously renewed as the body colour had been neglected.

As Daven and Gifford rode down the bank a red-haired, red-faced man rose from the stone that had been his chair, swung his terrible whip, which hard flogging had unplaited at the belly, and straightened his team for the steep creek bank, his words punctuated by the rifle-like whip-strokes.

‘Come on, *hides*! Gee back! Com-ee way! Way back, Stumpy! Lift her, yer cows! Whoa back, Tiger! Lift her! Blast yer, lift her!’

The team strained—all but one of them, a poley bullock whose want of horns and head-strength had given him a more than simian cunning to protect him from his horned fellows. This bullock, having no horns to be hurt by bow or yoke, slouched in the team, carrying half the weight of the bow, and rarely pulling a pound.

The driver's eyes had watched him in expectancy. Now as he saw the polled bullock not only not drawing, but advertising the fact by standing at an acute angle to the draught chain, he took a pole-pin and threw it, but was so enraged that he missed in his aim, and struck the offender's yoke mate on the horn, so that that animal bucked almost out of his yoke in pain.

The bullocky went round the team and recovered the pole-pin, then he beat the polled bullock with it and insulted him grossly.

'Ah, yer dirty waster! Yer lazy crawler! . . . George Reid!' He said this as a triumphant insult, and looked at the beast as if he expected him to be affected to tears. 'I'll make yer pull the flamin' pole out o' the waggon yerself!'

He came to the near side again, and straightened the team for another move.

'Get up, hides! Stumpy! Tiger! Faded Lily! Bony Brim! Come-ee way! 'Enery Parkes! Alligator! Gee-e-e back! George Reid—yer twicer! Gee-e-e!'

The team strained and panted; the waggon moved two inches, and stopped again. The bullocky lifted his hat, and wiped his wet forehead with his hairy arm—hairy from fingers to half-way above the elbow, where the sun had touched him, and white as a child's to the

shoulder, where the scanty shirt of the track had protected it.

He straightened them again and again, and made not a foot of progress; exhausted his patience, which, by the way, was great despite his impulsive colour; ran round the team to the polled bullock, beat him grievously, and said in a murderously sneering tone:

‘Call yerself a bullock? You’re a schemin’ cow!’

He went to the near-side leader and spoke kindly; tried the team once again, failed as usual, and, overcome with grief, drew a pound-note from his pouch, put it under the nose of Tiger, and said to the wondering, panting beast:

‘I’ll bet yer a quid to a shillin’ you can’t lift the waggon a bleedin’ yard.’

And at that Daven and Gifford, who had stopped their horses by the zamias that fringed the creek, laughed, and the bullock-driver looked up shamefacedly, and put the note in his belt-pouch. He fronted the horsemen—a scarlet-faced, red-haired man of vast breadth of shoulder and depth of chest, tapering to hips just heavy enough to make the ideal of a strong man—a sentient wedge of muscle. Daven recognised him.

‘Why, it’s Red Mick!’

‘That’s me,’ said Hercules of the scarlet blushes. ‘Think I remember you blokes, too. You was up here in the boom?’

‘Yes.’

‘An’ your names—now don’t tell me; it ’ud bother me for a week if I forgot yer name. Yes, your name’s Daven and yours Gif something—yes, Gifford.’

‘That’s right. Been here all the time?’

' Yes. I 'ad bad luck this last drought. I 'ad a nice place: 'bout 'undred 'ead o' fats an' fifty 'orses; 'an tick an' red-water kills me cattle, an' 'the 'orses go in the drought. An' I've bin three weeks on the road this time. See that flamin' creek? Well, me tigers split two bows last time I come through.'

' How's the field looking?'

' Minin'! Seems ter me it's lookin' pretty bad; chuckin' away money with both 'ands, they been. What can y' expect from the English? 'They don't know what money can do.'

' And is it so bad?'

' What d'ye think? Lode underlyin' east—see?' He squatted on his heels and drew, with his forefinger as pencil, a plan in the sand. ' Manager knows it's underlyin' east, because it goes out of the shaft east. Blast me if the flamin' loonatic doesn't put a cross-cut out west! They tell me it cost five thousand pounds, too.'

Daven didn't accept all this evidence unreservedly.

' If the place is so done up, Mick, why do you stay here?' said he.

Red Mick became Scarlet Mick again.

' There's a piece here I'm shook on.'

' Eh?' asked Gifford.

' A girl he's after,' Daven interpreted.

Gifford laughed.

' It's good to get into the land of naturalness again. Why, I was almost forgetting my slang!'

' Going to be spliced, Mick?' asked Daven, unconsciously falling into the old style and the old talk, and losing the company manners that politics had forced upon him.

My oath!'

‘When?’

‘When? Oh, well, as soon as the girl says “Yes.”’

‘What! Haven’t you asked her yet?’ laughed Gifford.

‘Me? Dozens er times.’

‘And she says “No” always?’

‘You’ll know all about it if you arst long enough, mister.’

‘No offence, Mick.’

‘Well, none taken. Yes, she says “No,” but I’ll keep on arstin’ till she says “Yes.”’

‘Good man.’

‘Going to stay in this creek all night, Mick?’

‘No fear! I’ll get out o’ here soon, an’ dodge along to Eclipse Corner. It’s only three mile or so, an’—an’, y’ see, I want t’ get there t’-night. Will you blokes stay behind a bit, an’ I’ll try to shift them again. That blasted George Reid! I give him a spell to fat him for the butcher, but a beast died on me last week, an’ I had to take him back in the team. He’d break up a convent, would that cow.’

‘Would he?’

‘He’s as cunnin’ as a waggon-load o’ monkeys. He never gets no sleep, because all the time he’s workin’ hard, schemin’ how to dodge workin’. He’s a schlen-terer, that bloke, an’ knows ’e is. Ain’t got no belief in himself, an’ that’s why he’s called George Reid. . . . Now, then! *Hides!* Pull! Gee back! Gord luv a duck! D’ye call that pullin’? . . . No use! No use! They won’t pull together, an’ I’m sick o’ floggin’ ’em.’

‘What’s to be done, then?’

‘Well, look here: you two ride on ter that bank an’ up to the first tree—that one a ’undred yards away. See?’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Then you gets off the ’orses, takes off the saddles, an’ calls out t’ me, “ All right, mate : bring the billy ! ” Then you lights a fire.’

‘ But what’s the use of that ?’

‘ George Reid ’ll think he’s going to be unyoked, and then he’ll pull.’

Gifford and Daven were contemptuous of the result, but they did as they were desired, and at their call the weary team pricked their ears with curiosity. That curiosity was excited to fever-height by the subsequent proceedings of Red Mick, who had possessed himself of a dozen bullock-bells and a billy-can, and who did not attempt to muffle the sounds thereof, but rather to exaggerate them. The bullocks were alive with interest, and followed his every movement up the bank. ‘ George Reid ’ lifted his hornless head high above the rump of the bullock before him. His eyes lighted with cunning eagerness, and he raised his voice in salutation of the fire that promised the camp.

Red Mick grinned. He climbed the creek bank and threw the jangling bells by the fire with a noise that was intended as a proof of publication, and not as a guarantee of good faith. Then he placed the billy-can near the fire, and returned to the waiting team. Their eagerness was very human, but less disguised than a human’s. The whip was in the air and on their hides, and the great waggon was behind, and a partial quicksand below ; but before was the camp and the jangling bells and the fire, and they pulled with strength and with pain, but also with hope. And whether faith can remove molehills or not, hope can change continents.

The team trembled from the knees downwards as

they stood on their toes scratching for an inch of progress. The leaders fell on their knees. Even 'George Reid,' his cunning outwitted, bent to the yoke and pulled as if for life, without the whip; for Red Mick did not flog them once they started to pull in earnest, but gave them merely the pleasures of anticipation by cracking the whip over their heads. The scent of the camp-fire came to them; they lifted the half-embedded waggon inch by inch; the whip crackled like the discharges of a Maxim gun; strength lifted the load a foot, and hope drew it a yard.

Red Mick swore a fearsome number of words to the minute. The noise and the bustle, and the general impression that beyond the creek was rest and payment, made the bullocks hustle up the bank and to the fire. There 'George Reid' attempted to stop, but the driver anticipated him. The great lash smote the loafer's head until the pain maddened him, so that he pulled four times his share—a fate that is almost always the schemer's, once he has been found out.

Red Mick kept the bullocks moving for a quarter of a mile, and then he stopped them and took the tin trunk which was his travelling wardrobe from the waggon. Gifford and Daven had slowly re-saddled their horses, and now joined him.

'What's up, Mick?'

'Oh, nothin',' replied Mick, grinning. 'I tore me shirt a bit, an' I'm gettin' a change.'

Some piece of waggon-gear had caught him in the hustling up the bank, and the man was almost naked to the waist. He produced a new shirt, and prepared it for wear by cutting off the collar and the two topmost buttons, and the sleeves above the elbow.

‘A man wants plenty o’ fresh air,’ he said, explanatory of the apparently wanton destruction.

The waning afternoon saw the horsemen at the Copper Hill Hotel at Eclipse Corner; dusk found Red Mick steering his ‘hides’ through the dusty channels to the gleam from the Copper Hill Hotel veranda-lamp, most of the bullocks still sulky from the deceit; an un-oiled and bone-dry axle squealing querimoniously; but ‘George Reid’—not morose nor cunning now, but only despairing—feeling as if the whip had flayed him, and pulling as if he must pull or die.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GIFFORD and Daven rode up to the veranda of the Copper Hill Hotel and dismounted. It was the usual building of hasty settlement in the tropics. Not a cool double-roofed bungalow; a brain-racking galvanized iron roof at a steep angle covered a barn, divided into rooms by iron partitions that halted ten feet below the ceiling, so that the bedrooms were almost as public as the bar.

There was no living thing in sight and no response to Daven's stamping on the floor; so, leaving their horses tied up to the veranda-posts, the mates explored the house, found nobody, and entered the kitchen—a detached building of log and dab, and immeasurably superior in construction to the hotel.

There was a pig nosing a flour-bag; on the table a hen prospecting a rolled-out square of paste on a pudding-board; and seated by the table a comely girl of twenty-two years or so, brown-haired and slightly freckled, big and deep-bosomed, and tall and strong as a police sergeant. Her sleeves were rolled up to elbow, so exposing her plump and flour-dusted arms. She did not hear the visitors, being obsessed by the novel she held in her lap, and which caused her to weep quietly and continuously, at the rate of a tear to every ten words.

‘H’m!’ said Daven.

‘Pardon me,’ said Gifford.

She jumped from the chair, and seemed to blush all over, the blood showing even on her flour-whitened arms. And then she saw—as if the novel had been a successful incantation—the man of her dreams, and she forget the plight he had found her in.

‘O-oh! Mr. Gifford!’ she said, and advanced to him all joy, all the last unshed tears still glistening in her eyes.

Daven saved Gifford the confession of his disadvantage by recognising her and extending his hand.

‘Why, it’s Miss Mills.’

‘That’s right—Delia Mills, and you’re Mr. Daven? I remember you.’

She shook his hand, and thereafter acted as if to prove that she had forgotten him. She turned to Gifford and shook his hand, and did not want to let it go, and said, ‘And you’ve been well, haven’t you? We heard all about your being Premier, and I was so proud.’

In embarrassment at having said so much she looked away, saw the hen and the pig, left the men, seized a broom, and drove the intruders out; so that the pig trotted quite four yards and the hen flew against the door, recovered herself, and ran out shrieking lunatically.

‘Mrs. Dunphy’s out, but I’ll show you the rooms.’

‘Isn’t your father here with you?’ asked Gifford.

Delia blushed in anticipation of the explanation.

‘No. You see, I’m servant here.’

Daven was incautious enough to show his surprise. ‘You?’

‘Yes. I—— You see, she’s my cousin, and father’s dead.’

‘No?’

‘Yes. He’s dead—three months ago. And when we

came to look into things most of his money was in Coocooros, and we held too long. All the other property—the bank had that. It would have been all right had he lived, but as soon as he died they wound all the business up, and I'll have nothing.'

'What a shame! And after educating you and all.'

'Yes. They've educated me, and I'll find it hard now. But while you've got books you can forget things.'

She left them and went back to the work of making a pudding paste, to replace that which had been injured by the broad-arrow tracks of the predatory hen.

'What luck!' said Daven, when they were alone. 'That fine girl—one of the finest on the earth—ruined by this rotten Coocooroo. It doesn't matter if we have to start off scratch again. We're men.'

'Yes. A pity, a thousand pities. Do you know, Jack, I think she's the girl Red Mick spoke of.'

'No!'

'Yes, she is.'

'What! a bullocky?'

'In better times he's something better. And he's a straight man, and a good man, and no boozier.'

'Oh, that's all right. But she's so much his superior.'

'All the better. If a man thinks he's married to his superior, he'll love her all the more.'

'P'raps! Hullo! what's this? Look at it! That woman tussling with that kid. . . . By George! she's put the smallest one down, and she's carrying the big little brute, who's just finished kicking her shins. Tell me what there is in woman that makes 'em give way to the bully.'

'I don't know,' said Gifford, glad to escape the con-

sideration of a subject whose careless study had wrought him ill.

The woman staggered under the weight of her tyrant ; the younger child came in her wake, his blue eyes glancing at no one thing for more than a second, but taking a toll of everything in their flashing scrutiny, his cheeks full of health-rud, his rosebud lips parted in a smile that included the whole world in its caress ; and Gifford and Daven bowed down and worshipped this most rational of all gods. When man is young his god is himself ; when less selfish he adores a woman ; when ripe, he worships a child.

But all children are not children. The four-year-old whom his thin mother carried to the veranda was a bloated voluptuary ; a muddy-skinned, muddy-eyed, snub-nosed glutton, with the temper of a fiend. His mother carried him to the veranda and seated him, whereat he howled again. She twined and patted his stiff maiden-aunt curls—four in front of each ear, and a sort of fearsome hippocampus-shape in hair on the top of his flat head.

‘Stop, Georgie darling, and mother will make his pretty curls.’

Then, strange to say, the bloated child stopped crying ; the baby Nero was sensible to flattery.

The woman took up her ungracious burden and entered the house, saying ‘Good-day’ as she passed the mates ; and Gifford called to the frank, sunny-faced baby, and the child came to him in an instant, as birds came to poets in the golden age.

They were friends in a moment, but the friendship was immediately interrupted by the arrival of a thin man, weakly bearded—a man whose every inch and

motion spelled 'horse.' Him the child ran to, saying, 'Dad, dad, dad, dad;' and the man took the child in his arms, and said to Gifford in welcome and inquiry:

'Come far?'

'No, only thirty miles to-day.'

'Know Red Mick?'

'Yes.'

'See him on the road?'

'Yes, about three miles back.'

'H'm! thought he'd get here to-night. He's got some stores for me. . . . Come after his girl, too, I s'pose.'

'Who? Miss Mills?'

'Yes, Deelyer. She won't have nothing to say to him, though; she wants a silver-tail.'

The bloated becurled heir came to the veranda and looked at his father uninterestedly, until he saw that the baby rode on the parental shoulder. Then his jealousy raved. He screamed as if in the direst agony, and tried to strike the little sun-god on the height, whereat that happy youngster looked down and smiled.

The father did not notice the demonstration; he asked Gifford and Daven if they would 'like a walk to the paddick,' and, acting on their affirmative, led the way to a dust-heap that had one time been a plain loaded with life. A middle-aged gin, puffing her pipe, drove before her an emaciated cow of podagric gait, and Gifford, noting these signs of the rainlessness of many years, said:

'It takes a man with a big heart to live in a place like this.'

Dunphy half assented. 'Yes, big heart or a little

purse. If you can't afford to go away ye've got to stay, just like a man in a war, and look as if you were brave.'

The gin hurried the cow to the rough milking-shed, and the animal staggered to the bail.

Dunphy explained: 'All the cows 'ave got the rickets through eating zamias. Zamias and the cotton-bush 's the only things that live through the drought, and it gives rickets to everything that eats it. They can't fat on it; it just keeps 'em alive, that's all.'

The gin fastened the bail, and pushed the cow till it leaned against the slabs of the shed. The cow groaned, settled itself comfortably at a dangerous angle, and yielded the milk.

'I've seen 'em that weak,' said Dunphy, 'you'd have to prop 'em up against a fence before you could milk 'em.'

They walked to the horse-yard, and at the gate were three other rickety cows, one leaning against a post, while four magpies, perched on its back, picked the ticks from its hide; the other two lay in the dust, and wild birds and domestic fowls eased them similarly. All fears and prejudice and differences were forgotten, now that Nature was at her last gasp, and the disease of one form of life had become the food of the other.

At the door of the loose-box Dunphy's eyes brightened; any man might understand that here was the one pride the ruin of the drought had left him. He put the child down and opened the top half of the door and showed them a stallion—all black beauty; but for the great star on his forehead there was not a white hair upon him. He had the great luminous eye of health, the thin lips, the soft tongue, the delicate muzzle, the

fine sense of touch, the perfect bearing that on the Persian plains, from whence his forebears came, would have made him a leader of leaders among horses.

He had looked at Gifford, but Daven had moved slightly, and at the sound all the stallion's senses were for Daven—eye, ear, and all intelligence bent in his direction.

‘He’s a bute,’ said Dunphy. ‘Quick as a flash ; his nerves are all on ball-bearings.’

It was at that moment that the uncouth child of the sodden eye, seeing that the object of his jealous hatred had fallen from the Olympus of the father’s shoulder, descended on the happy infant without warning, clutched a good handful of bright yellow hair, and tore it out, while the baby shrieked once. Dunphy turned, and, in a spirit of poetical justice, he not ungently pulled the long sausage curls of the assaulter.

Then arose long wails unto the fates, to his mother, and the world, and the thin figure of Mrs. Dunphy appeared at the kitchen.

‘Who’s hitting George?’

‘I did. He tore the hair out of Tom’s head.’

‘How dare you touch him! How dare you lift a hand to him!’

‘He hit Tommy.’

‘You touch him again, and I’ll——’ The wrath was that of a she bear robbed of her whelps. ‘You—you! Come to mother, Georgie dear.’

The criminal went to her, established in his belief of his own goodness by her sympathy.

‘Damn the women!’ said Dunphy. ‘They always stick to the waster. She’ll coddle that kid and pet him till she pets him into gaol.’

‘That’s a fine horse, Mr. Dunphy.’

‘He is that. Only four years. You see, he’s lost his third grinder, and the mark’s beginning to go.’

‘Want to sell him?’

‘I’ve got to. The missus says I was a chump to keep him so long. I’ve fed him on compressed fodder for three years now, and this drought ’ull last another year.’

Daven looked at the sky. ‘There’s a cloud in the north.’

‘Oh, clouds! We’ve had a cloud once a month for two years, and never a drop o’ rain.’

‘But have you had two clouds? There’s another in the south.’

‘My troubles. I’ll chance it. I want to sell the horse. He’s got no vices, and not a blemish. He might run away with you once every six months, but that’s only his fun.’

‘How much?’ asked Gifford suddenly.

‘Forty quid—not a bean under.’

‘I’ll take him, subject to trial.’

‘Right; he’s yours.’

The beautiful head flashed round again and looked at Gifford.

‘What do you call him, Mr. Dunphy?’

‘I called him The Boss.’

‘Well, his name’s changed: I’ll call him The Flash.’

CHAPTER XXXIV

‘On pain of death let no man mention death to me. It is a word infinitely terrible.’

IN the dusk Delia Mills called them to tea, and as they sat in the long dining-room a man drove a light buggy to the door. Dunphy rose and took the horse to the stable, and the stranger entered. He was a thin man, of a height that the thinness exaggerated to the tallness of a guardsman. He came slowly to the table and seated himself, looked around with a swift, bird-like glance, and recognised Gifford.

‘’Ello! ’ello! Don’t you remember me—Ned Hoskins?’

‘Ned the Prodigal?’

‘Yes—put it there. How are you?’

‘Good enough to fight for my life. How are you?’

‘Oh, me, I’m booked—gettin’ slowly worse this last year. Consumption in the throat it is.’

‘But you were the strongest man at the Jerk.’

‘So I was, mate. I was too strong. But I’m right while the drought lasts.’

‘Dry air?’ said Daven.

‘Yes. ’Ello, I remember you, too. When the rain comes I’ll die.’

They rallied him as men rally the dying man, even

when the death-rattle is in his throat. 'You die! No fear; you're good for another score yet.'

Ned the Prodigal shook his head. 'No, not much; I'm done. Ar-r-h! look at that damn little Dick Deadeye pokin' his finger in the baby's eye! A-r-r-h! ye little wild cat! Do it again and I'll flay ye!'

'Don't put your finger in his eye, Georgie dear,' cooed the mother, glancing an impotent, snake-like hatred at the Prodigal.

The interesting youth had mixed stew, tinned salmon, pickles, and Worcester sauce together, and now he protruded his long futile upper lip until he looked like a tapir, pointed a spoon at the jam, and said, 'I want some 'er that.'

His adoring mother gave it. He mixed the nauseous ollapodrida, and ate it as if there were no hereafter.

Ned the Prodigal glared at him for a moment and returned to his audience.

'An' I think the rain's comin' soon. There was lightning to-night at Wes'minster Abbey, and the air hasn't got the dried feel any more.'

'Yes, they told me down by Poison Flat that the niggers say rain is coming, and that the ants are building in the trees.'

Dunphy spoke. 'That's nothing. Why, a ant is the biggest damn fool in creation. Two years ago they left their nests and took all the baby ants and eggs into the trees. They was about two weeks movin' house, and there was three men worked here three months on the strength of it, stackin' the tin wash in the creek while they waited for the water. And after them ants had kidded them three poor blokes, what hadn't got a whole shirt between 'em, to work all that

time, dash me if they don't all come down again and go back to the old nests. Ants is loonatics. Yer can't take no notice of 'em. I'd just as soon back a parson to pray three inches o' rain as I'd lay odds on a ant.'

Daven rose and went to the nightly task of writing the daily letter to his wife. Delia Mills and Mrs. Dunphy cleared the table. The glutton child had fallen asleep, his head in his unfinished mixture of horrors. Mrs. Dunphy carried him away, half struggling, half drugged by his surfeit, and breathing like a stranded whale.

'About midnight, I guess,' said Ned, 'that stuff he's eaten 'ull begin to get in its fine work on him, an' the kid 'll howl like a dingo, 'n keep us all awake.'

'What's Coocooroo look like?'

'Pig shearin': much cry and little wool. Got fine smelters there, and they're just finishing the railway. But, man, there's no ore.'

'What a mess the first management made of it!'

'True enough, and I believe they didn't know. Why, they used the drought for two years as an excuse; but all the water in the Pacific wouldn't bring 'em a dividend.'

A fit of coughing shook him. He stopped suddenly, and said, 'I'll go to bed. It's nearly always bed now. Good-night, mates,' and went to the collection of iron sounding-boards styled by courtesy a bedroom.

Gifford went to the veranda. A wicked crescent moon had gored a cloud with each of its horns, and showed an inky blackness closing on the light. The dryness had gone out of the air; every atom of the earth seemed electric; the air hummed like a gigantic dynamo. The tenseness and the density depressed

him. Stralie was at Coocooroo, only fifteen miles off, yet she seemed in another planet that night, so much did that black sky and the thick atmosphere make for isolation of the human.

Delia Mills came out and leaned on the rail, not seeing him until after he had spoken.

‘Oppressive night, Miss Mills?’

‘Oh! you startled me. Mr. Gifford, isn’t it? Yes, I feel suffocating.’

Her voice was hysterical, and he drew nearer, and said, ‘You’ve been crying?’

‘No, I haven’t. What if I have? It’s nothing.’

‘Now what’s the trouble? Why did you cry?’

She turned half away. ‘Oh! I suppose I’m a fool. It was over that book.’

‘The one you were reading this afternoon?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s the name of it?’

‘“The Cloister and the Hearth.”’

‘Yes. Very good it is.’

‘But he was a fool—a good fool.’

‘Who? Gerard?’

‘Yes—to leave Margaret after he had found her again; to go worrying about his silly old church when she loved him so.’

‘It was duty.’

‘Oh, duty! Don’t talk about duty. There’s the duty of a mother, but that’s pleasant duty. Men should never do their duty unless their duty’s nice.’

‘You may be right. I can’t argue. Gerard was wrong.’

‘Of course he was wrong.’

‘Love is the only thing worth having.’

‘Yes, and how many have it?’

‘Very few. The world’s all mixed up.’

From far down the road came the irregular harshness of a bullock bell, swung by the riding horse of a bullock team.

‘Red Mick,’ said Delia under her breath.

‘Red Mick!’ echoed Gifford composedly. Then some devil of inquisitiveness or some angel of sympathy prompted him to speak again. ‘Is *he* your duty?’

‘He isn’t! he isn’t! Who told you he was?’

‘I heard. That’s all.’

‘You heard! Well, he isn’t. D’ye think I’d marry a man who’s got no “mister” to his name? Mrs. Red Mick, too! Very likely. I——’

The bullock bell sounded closer. Through the dusk she saw the lumbering bulk of the waggon, and fled to cover. She did not appear again that night, and her lover waited uncomplainingly till there was no hope, and then made his bed under his waggon, and slept.

The heavy night closed down upon the house, and all the souls therein sought sleep in vain—the sick man, Ned the Prodigal; Daven, the uxoriously lonely; Gifford, looking vainly for light ahead, and seeing none, and beginning to regard Stralie as for ever lost to him; Delia Mills, burning all over, as if her night-dress were the martyr’s shirt of fire, when she recalled that Gifford had so carelessly spoken of her as the Dulcinea of the Red Man, and that perhaps he guessed her hopeless love of himself. They lay there looking up to the common roof that sheltered all their sleeplessness, turning over stealthily in their beds, because they knew that there were no complete partitions to

the rooms, and that all sounds were as public as a daily newspaper.

Delia, with marvellously stealthy quietness, rolled in her sleepless bed as noiselessly as a fish turns in deep water.

Midnight brought a fall in the temperature, and immediately every stud, and plate, and nail, and board in that house commenced to groan, and creak, and shiver. A little wind stirred for a minute, lifted an insecure sheet of iron on the veranda roof, and shook it—tap-tap-tap-tap!

Old Booper, the saddle-horse of Red Mick's waggon, rang his melancholy bell as he walked around the house. Dunphy's dogs hustled him from the back of the house, and the horse went to the veranda and scratched his neck against a post, so that the whole building shook and jarred, and the cracked bell sounded like a team of belled bullocks stampeding in the dark.

Two bats who lived in a lime-cave near the house commenced operations for the night, and Ned the Prodigal cursed fretfully as their filthy wings flapped about his head; for, though phthisis had gripped him, he had all a physically-sane man's horror of things that creep and of the unclean life of the dark.

A flooring-board by the veranda door began to contract loudly, with little squeaks and long-drawn-out cracks; a cane-chair in Delia's room took up the tale, and proclaimed at great length that the temperature had fallen fifteen degrees or so; every piece of furniture chorused the fact.

From the Government dam—now only a pestiferous mud-hole filled with the bones of sheep, cattle, and

kangaroo—came the melancholy wail of the curlew, a true kill-joy and a prophet of bale, sending that long note of woe, agony, abandonment, and despair over the land that seemed to be condemned to death.

‘Cooo-ee-la!’

The wakeful men heard the piercing, almost human cry, and interpreting it each in the way of his pet fear, were made more sleepless.

‘Cooo-ee-la!’

It translated itself to Daven: ‘My wife is ill.’

‘Cooo-ee-la!’

To Ned the Prodigal: ‘All these hopes of health are only the blind faith of the consumptive man. I’ll never get well; I’ll soon have to die.’

‘Cooo-ee-la!’

To Delia Mills: ‘He never gave a thought to me; all they said of him’s wrong. He hasn’t been untrue to Miss Field; he’s not the sort.’

‘Cooo-ee-la!’

To Gifford: ‘She’ll never forgive. There’s no happiness ahead for me.’

‘Coo-ooo-ee-la!’

To the waggon-dog it promised some unknowable danger; he whimpered under it, and at last sat up, lifted his head, pointed his nose at the dying watery moon, and howled all his fear and anxiety in a long-sustained ‘O-o-o-o-o-h!’

Red Mick slept under his waggon—the sleep of the healthy man, deep as the Adamic sleep that is alleged to have produced Eve. His dog patrolled the waggon and whimpered, sniffed the new breeze, and tasted the thunderbolts in it, and then showed his dislike therefor by howling near the heels of old Booper, whereat that

morose animal kicked with both hind-feet at once, and the dog jumped to safety, retaining his brains by a miracle.

The bullocks had stopped feeding on the withered scrub, and patrolled near the waggon, oppressed by the vague fear of something unusual in their lives of little feeding and much work.

Tap !

Daven whispered from his side of the room to Gifford's :

'Hear that, George?'

'Yes; what was it?'

'A raindrop.'

'No fear.'

'Yes. Wait; there may be another.'

'Co-ooo-ee-la !'

The wind sighed round the building; the loose sheet of galvanized iron took up its tale again.

'Tap, tap, tap, tap !'

'Coo-oo-ee-la !'

A crackling perilously near, as of dry little sticks burning under an oven.

'What's that, George—fire?'

'No; that's thunder.'

Tap !

'Co-ooo-ee-la !'

'Another raindrop, George.'

'Yes, and that's about all.'

As if to answer him, a flood of blinding light filled the house for half a second, showing the shadows of the figures in their beds printed on the iron roof above; the thunder-peal came in one long loud crepitation, as if the earth had burned up and gone aloft in a sheet of

flame, crackling to destruction among the stars. The lightning flamed again, as sudden and yet as regular as a lighthouse flash at sea ; there was another tremendous crackling, and silence.

Tap!

‘Rain again, George.’

Tap, tap!

‘There it is—that’s true.’

Outside Red Mick’s dog whimpered in delight ; the bullocks voicing gratitude. The rain played its own song upon the roof in many tones, splashed in the dust of the road and turned it to mud, and then settled into a long steady pouring that proved the drought had really broken up. From the rooms the three healthy people—Gifford and Daven and Delia Mills—crept, thirsty for the rain, and with the desire to stand bare-headed under it, and retreated, muttering apologies as they found that each had the same desire.

They heard Mick remove his bed hurriedly from under the waggon to the veranda ; the sick man, who had been dozing, awakened, and cursed the air for losing the dryness that meant easy breathing ; the gluttonous ruffian of four years awoke, as Hoskins had said he would, and screamed his horror of the nightmares he had eaten.

Then did his father and mother awake and curse him and pet him according to their feelings ; but the bright and merry baby slept in peace through all the pandemonium.

‘Ow-ow-ow-ow! a-r-r-h! I’m killed! O-o-o-h! a-r-r-h!’

‘Poor Georgie!’

‘Poor George be hanged! What d’ye let the kid

feed himself up for like that? It 'd keep a camel awake.'

'O-o-o-o-h! a-r-r-h! o-o-o-o-o-h!'

'Poor Georgie! Go ter sleep, Georgie.'

'While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground.'

'O-o-o-o-h! a-r-r-h! o-o-o-o-o-h!'

'Wake up, yer little wretch!' Then, suddenly repentant: 'Ah, poor Georgie! Was mother nasty to him? There, there, there!'

Georgie imitated the howling of a dingo with great fidelity to nature.

'Go ter sleep, Georgie dear.'

'Oh, words of mercy, can it be
That gate was left ajar for me—
For me, for me, for me, for me,
Was left ajar for me?'

'O-o-o-o-h! o-o-o-h! a-r-r-h!'

'You little wretch! Will you be quiet!'

She slapped him vigorously, and he awoke from his awful pursuit by a ferine animal made of stew and pickles to the more tangible horror of a mother's hand lifted in anger.

'O-o-oh, mumma!'

'Yes, poor Georgie! Was mumma cruel? Naughty mumma.'

Dunphy spoke: 'For pity's sake make the little devil go to sleep. You keep on apologizin' to him, and he'll start again.'

'You—don't talk. Go to sleep yourself. You made me hit him.'

The tortured glutton was soothed to unconsciousness; the rain became a lullaby for all.

Delia Mills breathed the clearer air, and having exhausted herself with thought and fretting, had fallen asleep.

Daven slept happily, Gifford brokenly, Hoskins in the stupor of weakness. Red Mick slumbered like a baby, for he had worked hard that day and earned rest, and the rain had come; and he wanted only one thing to make happiness, and that was Delia Mills, and he had hope of her. The last sound they heard that night was the rain coming from afar off against the wind; the last sensation, the smell of the rain-broken earth, like a new-made grave in moist and virgin ground.

The bullocks lifted their heads to the gushing skies; the rain made the mud to flow in saddle-coloured rivulets; the whole earth lifting to the promise of fat years, of the monsoon in his immutable season and the etesian winds.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE day dawned to a hurricane; the rain ceased; all the electrical energy that the drought had accumulated was suddenly emptied on the earth. When the people of Eclipse Corner looked out upon the plain and ridges they saw an English winter—the ground whitened with hail, as by a heavy and regular fall of snow, the trees leafless, many of them rent by the gale and all ploughed by hail, as if by rifle bullets. The hurricane ceased as suddenly as it had begun, leaving the Copper Hill Hotel without any roof to its veranda; then the wind began to blow again. But from the south-east the rain fell in sheets, waves, and douches, discovering every hole in the baked and warped iron, every crack in the bone-dry weather boards, so giving every room its miniature shower-bath.

The rains held the little settlement of Eclipse Corner together for four days; then came a day of sweltering heat that made the moist earth intumescent, another hurricane, and another deluge.

The new life that the rain had given to the world raged in the blood of Gifford, and Daven, always in a hurry to return to his wife, chafed at the delaying weather. At last, seeing that the rain threatened to be permanent, they decided to brave the elements, and go to the mine that had eaten so much money without return.

It was but half a day's ride away, and an hour of inspection showed them its utter valuelessness.

They returned to Eclipse Corner in rain, but next day the sun shone brightly, and everything seemed to trumpet its joy of being alive. Gifford had his trial of the stallion, and found him perfect. Delia Mills rode with him. The day was of supreme beauty; the smell of the moist earth ascended to them. The horses had all the pleasure of the riders, and on that plain that stretches from Eclipse Corner to the denticled lime ranges that go to Coocooroo and beyond, the speed of The Flash quickened unconsciously, and Delia's clumsy mare responded. There was wind in front, and the whirr of the reprieved world above, and below the breath of the stallion rose to Gifford's nostrils. Disdaining all the risk of the leap, he put The Flash at the great gashes in the earth where the deluge had made new watercourses, so that Delia—who was on horseback courage incarnate—called to him to be careful.

He laughed back at her, his face flushed and his eyes agleam, until he seemed to her many Greek gods in one.

'I'm all right, but don't you follow,' he shouted to her. "'Time to plant his hoofs, hold his hoofs, length and length—right enough.'" Now! over.'

The big black gathered himself to the leap and cleared the chasm by a yard, and Gifford reined, and turned him to go back to the lady. But she had no intention of staying behind. All her obstinacy rose at being outplaced and ordered to stay in safety. She flogged the clumsy mare to a gallop, and forced her to the leap; but the mare knew the uselessness of the attempt, and would not even try. Her fore-feet struck the bank, and the impact brought her to her knees,

throwing the rider. Gifford dismounted in an instant and tied his horse to a tree, jumped into the wash-out, and lifted Delia.

‘I’m all right—just a bit shaken.’

He wiped her dress with his handkerchief, and, finding that she was not injured, became parentally annoyed.

‘Why did you do it?’ he demanded. ‘I told you not to follow.’

She said nothing, enjoying the bullying because it hinted at proprietary rights, and, as she trembled still, he put his arm around her waist, and half led, half lifted her to the solid ground. As they stood thus a moment, and she wished that his arm might stay there for ever, and make them one flesh, a smartly-horsed buggy came from behind the lime cliffs on the track to Silver Valley and went on to Coocooroo. There was but a moment for recognition, but it was enough. Stralie, Mrs. Hempel, and Abbey were in the buggy. They had seen him in this questionable situation. He cursed his luck, and removed his arm from her waist, and then Delia pretended to be more shaken than she really was. In the blessed half-embrace he supported her to her horse, and almost lifted her into the saddle; but that was the end of the half-philandering. They rode back to Eclipse Corner slowly and in silence, Gifford chewing the bitter cud of memory, Delia looking at him slyly now and then, and seeing nothing but disappointment when she marked his knotted brow.

He and Daven left next day for Coocooroo, and, at parting Delia brought them the stirrup-cup of tea, and pleaded with eyes for the unconscious Gifford’s pity. But, when they were on the road again, the horses

stepping out briskly, The Flash pannading, stopping in jerks and saccades, and going very delicately on three legs, Daven told the blind man of Delia's passion for him, and the blind man was very becomingly surprised.

'You're mistaken, Jack,' said he.

'Not much! I tell you that while you're in the country, and, any way, till you're married, Delia will never take another man. And you know, George, if Miss Field—you know.'

'If Miss Field does what?'

'If she won't make it up again, don't you go wasting your life. There's a fine girl madly in love with you—pretty well educated, too, although that doesn't matter in a woman. A man's wife needn't come up to his head; if she's as high as his heart, that's enough.'

'If Stralie won't be reconciled, old man, I'll never marry.'

'Oh, bosh! The "never smiled again" game won't suit you. Shake up that moke of yours and I'll give you a sprint up to the limes.'

The two horses thundered along the miles, going free and full of the intoxication of their own speed, and wife and maid were forgotten: for no strong man in action can remember mere woman; if he did, the work of the world would never be done.

Rounding Pulpit Rock, they saw the metamorphoses wrought by English money and Tom Locky. Everywhere great excavations of marble—white, and crystalline, and dull blue, but never the colour of ore.

The leading spirit of all this criminal foolishness was eleven thousand miles away, probably engaged at that moment in lying to his shareholders in London. The aider and abettor of the extravagance, Tom Locky,

came to meet them as they turned into the deeply-milled track that led to the mine buildings. He was a Cornishman, and slow and heavy at that, yet, with all the Australian casualness, he greeted them as if they had not been absent for more than an hour.

‘Got anything yet, Tom?’

‘Oh yes; the ‘ill’s all hore—a mass o’ hore—once we get on to it. I’m sinkin’ on a leader now.’

‘Money holding out?’

He grinned. ‘Pretty well—good enough fr me. They’ve spent sixty thousan’ poun’, an’ as much of it was spent in London as here. Still, I’ve saved a bit; an’ if they close down to-morrow I’m all right.’

‘And Coocooroo?’

‘They’re doin’ splendid. Can’t make a mistake there.’

He nodded oracularly, but they were unimpressed, knowing the general ignorance of this optimist, and rode on more doubtful than before. The waste of money and the loss of effort in Tom Locky’s lime-quarries, made to discover the mythical ‘mass of hore,’ gave them a foretaste of the disappointment of Coocooroo.

They came out on a great amphitheatre walled by lime-cliffs. That great space had once been covered by the roofs of caves, now decomposed into the hard ferruginous earth, that rung metallically to the horses hoof-falls. In the centre of the circus a pump gasped and drew, near a little heap of lead ore, and the sick smell of steam on the ore and the mine sludge came to them. A man sat by the poppet-head eating his dinner; the pump-exhaust spat at the solid rock and dropped a greasy sweat upon the earth.

They did not know the man, but that was of little moment. Daven rode as closely to the steam as his snorting horse would take him, and said :

‘ Good-day, mate.’

‘ Good-day, mate.’

‘ Who’s show is this ?’

‘ The Damn Fool Syndicate, *I* call it ; but it’s called the John Peters Syndicate.’

‘ That’s the divining-rod man, isn’t it ?’

‘ Yes. He come here an’ hops about with a twig, and by-an’-by the twig goes down, an’ he says, “ Sink a shaft here.” So down we goes two hundred and fifty blasted feet, and at two hundred feet we cut a pound o’ lead, an’ at two hundred and fifty we gets swamped out.’

‘ A shaft sunk on faith, eh ?’

‘ Yes, that’s about it.’

‘ Good enough to move mountains with, but not to open mines on ?’

‘ My oath, no ! Well, it’s all of a piece. This field all through is the same : plenty o’ money, an’ lots o’ Scotch navigation.’

‘ What’s that ?’

‘ All brute strength and no brains.’

They laughed and left him, and rode on.

Two miles out of Coocooroo they met the last railway gang by a ballast pit in a virgin creek of ti-tree and swamp-oak. The great rake of ballast-trucks writhed like a snake as it was galloped at breakneck speed over the unfastened line and round the screeching curves. The men sat stolidly on the heaped trucks, holding their places by mere custom on this maddest journey known to man.

But the ballast-rake was the only sign of the old

energy. As they approached the town the efforts of the men working near the track seemed perfunctory, as if they knew that all their effort was certain to be vain.

When Gifford and Daven met Hempel the first impressions became fixed.

'Berkshire's gone,' said the always busy man in his usual jerky fashion. 'Came up here with the other directors and had a look round, said he was ill, and he'd have to go to the coast.'

'What's the matter with him?'

'Dyspepsia, I guess. He's got a "bear" on his stomach, and he won't get well till he gets to a telegraph-station and cables his broker to sell Coocoroos till the cows come home.'

'But he's been selling before.'

'Course he has, and some of the others, too—all of 'em except one. They had this information two months before they let it out.'

'And the mines?'

'She's a blue duck, old man.'

'After all the flourish of trumpets?'

'The same trumpet flourishers 'ull soon be as small as a little dog in tall grass. But they've sold and they've got the cash, and very little else matters. This thing's been mismanaged from the jump. Shafts all sunk by contract here. See?'

'Yes.'

'They sweated the good man, worth seven pounds a week, down to four pounds a week by puttin' him in hard ground, and then they brought the waster worth thirty shillings a week up to four pounds a week by puttin' him in soft country. They engaged miners at Ballarat, and company paid fares here. See? Agent at

Ballarat got ten shillings a head for selecting men. One time he sent two shoemakers here as miners. One got to the shaft and looked down, and guessed he'd rather die on the surface; other fellow stated candidly he'd only come for a health trip. And it was all of a piece—unmanagement everywhere. They wouldn't let good contractors select their own mates. Y' know, tried to force the good men to carry the bad. Result, the good men leave. Why, they had a foreman, a pet of the G.M.'s, and he was so slow they called him Lightning Jim. He was a marvellous man, never been in a mine before, but he must have got leaded somehow. Look at him movin', and you'd say he had two ton o' lead in each boot.'

They laughed at the shameless exaggeration.

'True bill. That man took a longer time to do nothin' than any other man on the job.'

'The whole business is rotten.'

'So it is. D'ye know, they had an assistant mine manager here, and he had such control over his men that one day a miner comes to him and puts a five-pound note on the desk, and says, "Look here, I'll give that fiver to the hospital if you'll only come outside and fight two rounds with me." The manager jumps to the telephone and calls for help, and the miner was so wild at not being able to make a date with him that he went away crying.'

'And how much has the thing cost?'

'First and last, she means a million of money, bad management, and no ore. What can you expect?'

Hoping against hope, Gifford deferred personally proving the truth or exaggeration of the verdict until he had seen Stralie again, and settled his fate once and

for all. Daven's reiterated belief that Stralie would succumb to the presence of her old lover stayed with Gifford, though he had persistently refused to believe that she was like other women in the facility of yielding to the nearness of the beloved.

It was unfortunate that they should meet in Mrs. Hempel's garden, and in broad daylight. Shelter or darkness would have brought her to his arms, but civilization has made us afraid of showing emotion except in darkness, and more ashamed of being suspected of naturalness.

So this foolish pair met and parted without either discovering the true meaning of the other.

He said: 'Stralie, do you forgive me?'

And she replied, stonily correct: 'I have no right to either blame you or forgive you now.'

The memory of the scene on the road to Eclipse Corner was in her mind, and he divined it, and answered it so lamely that she deemed him again guilty of a suppression of the truth.

'It was Delia Mills: she fell from her horse.'

'It's of no consequence to me, Mr. Gifford.'

'And you won't forgive me?'

'I neither forgive nor blame.'

'Stralie, I've been imprudent, but I never wavered from you in the slightest.'

'Never? And yet you confessed you had kissed that woman! Oh, I have nothing to say to you.'

'That is final?'

'Yes.'

'Then you never loved me, and I won't stay to argue.'

He lifted his hat angrily, and left her; yet a hair

would have drawn them together. She wanted to call him back, but thought of her supposed wrongs and stayed silent; he wanted to return and force a reconciliation, but believing her heart was hard, his hardened, too, and he went his way.

He was almost glad that they were to be strangers when a week of experience of the mines of Coocooroo showed him that he was almost utterly ruined. With the marvellously rapid change of fortunes that belongs to new communities, he, who from his birth had been petted by circumstance and enriched by blind luck, now found all his money departed with his honours.

‘I’ll have to buckle to again,’ said Daven. ‘I’ve got to start nearly off scratch. And you’re about blown out, George?’

‘I’ve a few hundred pounds, unless I can sell my stock, and you can bet the whole game’s up by now. But I’m as strong as a lion, and I’ve got the best horse in the north. Australia’s wide, old man, and there’s a fresh start for us.’

It was at Girofla that a man brought to them news of a mountain-range of mineral—copper, lead, silver, and gold. He sat on his boot-heels—a ragged old little man with a fierce eye that flamed at contradiction, and a white and bristling beard—and drew his mountain-range in the dust with his forefinger.

‘See that? Well, that’s the lode, about two mile long an’ four chain wide, an’ y’ can’t see the stone for metal. I knoo it fifteen year ago, but I was druv back by drought.’

In their altered condition, Daven and Gifford were ready to take up anything that offered a possibility of success; so it was arranged that Daven, having exceeded

the limit allowed by his wife, should return to her, and bring her back to Coocooroo to await their exploration of the distant field.

Gifford stayed at Girofla, and the night of Daven's departure Ned the Prodigal came from Eclipse Corner, stating, amid coughing and curses, that sleeping in a house was rapidly bringing him to the grave, and that he proposed to accompany Gifford wherever he liked to lead.

They waited a week for Daven—a week of watching Annie Johnson and Charley Byers knitting and quarrelling, of listening to the tales of Jim Johnson, of reveling in the new life that had come to the earth—every root and seed growing as if to make up for lost time; and on other days of being imprisoned by the rain, falling as if it could continue indefinitely.

All the creeks were running bankers for a day, and damp the day after if the sun shone; the scented scrub that rent and rifted the lime was gay with colour and perfume; the bottle-trees had a lighter green of leaf. The fig-trees at the entrance of every cave had alone been unaffected, for drought had not touched them; their roots went waving and searching down the caves for a hundred feet or so, feeling for the water as an elephant feels with his trunk, and finding it. And every rood of that iron soil, seemingly as nutritive as asphaltum, sprang into bloom—poison-peach and rosella, hibiscus, lilac, and amaranth. The grass grew on a new earth under a new heaven, the rowen springing thick and green from a soil as clean of haulm as if it had been gleaned and burned and swept.

King Smith with his gins had settled at Girofla. The oldest and ugliest of the harem was the sorceress, who

had been invested with the power of rain-making. Now that the rain continued unreasonably, the tribe had insisted that the gin should stop the rain she alleged she had caused ; and as they threatened to spear her in case of failure, the sorceress regretted her fame, and sought refuge in Jimmy Johnson's yard. And there was talk of a deputation of scoffers to interview the parson of Coocooroo, who had prayed for rain and had his church damaged by it, and now stood hopelessly by while wise Nature did her work in her own way at her own season. The approximation of the rain-making gin to the rain-praying Churchman was too great for the hard-headed people who had borne those four dreadful years—seeing inexorable Nature killing her moaning flocks and herds, taking toll of all life, and then rebuilding all, at double the speed of its destruction. They knew she would do it again and again inevitably ; for the clock of the world was started so in its beginning, and no prayer can make it change pace or path unto the end. Sorceress and priest ! They were the same value in the minds of the men who criticised them with the same laughter, and appraised the black magic at the standard of the white worship.

Meantime, conventionalism protected the white magic, and the simple logic of the wild men made them lay in wait to spear Bililla the Sorceress, who had called the spirits of the rain and could not lay them again.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE rain ceased the day before Daven's return, and King Smith received Bililla as a much greater sorceress than he had first believed—a sorceress who had at last stopped the rain, although the work had been difficult and lengthy. The little tribe sat in the dust by Johnson's veranda, happy again, and full of puppy humour; King Smith, with his brass device of monarchy—the burglar-proof-safe plate, hung around his neck by a parrot chain—shining resplendent on his breast.

Phelan, the fierce-eyed little man, had come to hurry Gifford on the quest of the new mountain-range of metals. He sat on his heels and drew more finger diagrams in the dust, and smoked and spat, and talked of his two-mile-long lode, and glared fiercely from his bushy eyebrows whenever the cross-examination cut too near the bone.

The marvellous lode was his fixed idea.

'There's a gray sort o' stone here,' he said, tracing a straight line in the dust, 'an' blue diorite 'ere, an'——'

'An' when you get inter the rainbow quartz you'll strike the Bank o' England,' interrupted Jim Johnson, his right eye ablaze with his most recent potations, the blood covering the white till the eye looked like a half-furled Union Jack.

Phelan darted at him a look of monkey rage; then he said to Gifford, 'See you to-morrer,' and went back to his camp as if he were afraid to stay.

'Don't you take no notice of 'im,' said Jim Johnson, drunkenly solemn. 'I've seen plenty o' blokes like 'im, comin' here an' tellin' lyre-birds' tales, an' gettin' people out to look at duffers. Nearer you get ter the place the smaller he'll say it is.'

'But he seems to believe all he says.'

'Them's the worst o' the lot; that kind keeps on talkin' to themselves when they're alone in the Bush, an' gets to believe all they hear themselves talk. Come an' 'ave a drink.'

'No, thanks. You've had enough, Jim.'

'I 'aven't 'ad any to feel. It takes half a bottle o' rum to give me self-respeck. Come an' 'ave a cigar, then. I suppose I'm not good enough.'

It was an unanswerable argument, and they went with him to show they were not proud; for in the Bush pride is a crime and an excessive dignity ridiculous.

Jim Johnson took up the tale again. 'Don't you go, Mr. Gifford; might 's well go snake-'untin'. None o' these old Bush whackers is to be believed. They used ter sit out there on the form, an' call school in, an' spit the drought away, an' lie the laces out o' their boots. I know 'em.'

'There must be some of them straight, Jim.'

'Not a one! Spitologists an' blasted fiblicators, every one on 'em. An' listen to 'em, an' they'll lie more to amuse yer—look yer in the eye and lie, and put on dog about bein' honest men all the time.'

He lurched towards the little sitting-room, and the two men who were left went to the veranda, where the

blacks played noisily, with shrieks of lunatic laughter at nothing.

‘He seems to think the trip ’ll be a duffer,’ said Hoskins.

‘I don’t think so; I have faith in this man, and I can’t be any worse off. But, duffer or not, I’m going. I must move on, and keep moving.’

‘I’m goin’ out to live,’ said Hoskins. ‘But what are you goin’ for?’

‘To forget.’

‘What have you got to forget—a girl?’

‘Yes.’

‘Turned you down?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’re none of ’em to be depended on—nearly as bad as men.’

‘She’s not. It’s all my fault.’

King Smith took up the parable.

‘That white Mary, gin along o’ you one time, Missa Giffer?’

‘Yowi! one time like me?’

‘Big fellow like you?’

‘Yowi.’

‘Gin no been like you big feller this time?’

‘No; too much not like me now.’

The savage delivered his verdict tersely:

‘S’posen that fellow White Mary not been walk about along you this time—s’posen my gin been too much sulky like it your white Mary, I——’

He rolled his eyes in earnestness.

‘What you do, Smith?’

The black man shook his club in illustration.

‘You been gib it your gin waddy along it cobbera.’

The white men laughed at the black man's way of settling love quarrels, but Hoskins insisted that the black man's methods had sense in them.

'Look at how some o' the city people beat their wives—an' the women 'ud go to hell for 'em.'

Gifford admitted the fact, denied the application, and recognised the futility of argument.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DAVEN duly returned with his wife; and bright and early next morning the four men rode off westwards, the fierce old man who was to guide them to El Dorado in the rear. Gifford, Daven, and Hoskins rode abreast, and always within laughshot of one another; and twenty yards ahead three pack-horses, one moment moody and slow, so that a stockwhip-cut awakened them to such surprise that they bucked almost free of their gear, and, the moment the stripe was forgotten, pig-jumping and pretending to bite one another in mere joy of the redintegrated earth, with much display of newly-shod hoofs in the sunshine and pretence of viciously flattened ears.

The track ended at a bouldery river, where some flower-seed imported in fodder during the drought, and brought here in horse-droppings, had covered the lower flats for many miles, with the little red bachelor's button, and the small poppy of the field.

The trees below the river-banks were dirty to their topmost branches with the flood wrack, and the new blossom struggled bravely for the mastery. Twenty feet above the present river-level a great gray gum held in its fork the carcase of a drowned horse, his badges of servitude, saddle and bridle, still on the rotting head and withers.

Old Phelan took the interest of a guide in this.

'A man was drowned, too,' he said—'goin' down the scrub to see a girl. They told him to wait a day till the river went down—y' know these rivers: they're flood in the mornin' and close up dry at night—an' he says he'd go that night an' swim through hell if he couldn't get t' the girl any other way. So in he goes, an' the flood lumbered him.'

It was rather a long speech for him, and near the end he flagged visibly, and at its conclusion dropped to the rear again.

They rode into the river, and found it shoulder deep, and dragged the stream to a shallower depth, and there found farce galling the kibe of tragedy. There was a tree four feet deep in rushing water; twenty feet above, and fifty yards away in a direct line, was the tree bearing the carcase of the horse; yet the man of the Divisional Board had nailed to the tree a notice to travellers:

When this board is under water the river is not
fordable.

By order,

I. MACGREGOR, *Clerk.*

And on the further bank were many laughing jackasses, each bird on his own gale-stripped gum, laughing and cackling so that it seemed that the world was only a huge joke—sometimes bitter, but always to be laughed at. They crossed so many necks and flats that the river seemed circumfluent to them, and beyond the last crossing the track ended, so far as they were concerned, and as far as the eye could see there was a great plain of spear-grass new springing, six weeks old and more

than a foot high, and growing so quickly that the eye might almost measure it.

Life was breaking round them everywhere ; the air, the water, and the earth teemed with action and desire. Even in the giant ant-hills, where the defenceless white ants held their pulpy bodies safe by an imprisonment measured by the sun, hermetically sealed in their cities till the darkness, there was a whirr of these low organisms striving to imitate a life of action. Every stone and log and bark fragment and puddle, that only six weeks before had seemed permanently dead, had now its colony.

It was Ezekiel's Valley-of-Dry-Bones allegory become form and fact. Out of every crevice of the rimose trees came all description of creeping things—some that ran sideways, some that progressed crab-like, queer, cautious fellows who protruded a nose and an eye on the end of an arm twice as long as their bodies to feel dangerous foreigners and things, and be thereby warned to go astern for their lives.

There were spiders that had exhausted all spider shapes and all freaks of grotesquerie—triangular, square, diamond, ugly and beautiful, brilliant as rainbows and dull as toads. The travellers rode into the webs of the great yellow spider, who spun from tree to tree his yellow viscous web of raw silk, strong enough to catch and hold the giant grasshopper in his leap—a web that swung just high enough to be broken by a rider's face, whereat the rider felt maniacal until he had removed the strands, and the great yellow author of it—who, lunatic and bloated with terror, forgot to bite, and fell off into the grass.

The rocks, the earth, the grass, and the trees swarmed

with ants—red, green, white, black, brown, purple, and orange; the little sugar ant, the black, the stinging green ant, the hopping ‘soldier,’ and all the varieties of the bull-dog, filling everything but the air with a suggestion of work—more or less well directed—of acquisitiveness, of cruelty, and of courage to the death.

‘They’re busy,’ said Gifford, ‘those ants.’

‘Always like that,’ replied Hoskins. ‘But I don’t think much of ’em—just like a crowd at an election: no brains, all shove, and Scotch navigation.’

Most of the life of the air was there—beetle, grasshopper, and butterfly, and bird—all wings, plumed and sharded, saltatory, papilionaceous: the black cockatoo, the sulphur-crested and the galah, the eagle and the hawk wheeling for their prey, the lory, the diamond sparrow, the little painted finches flashing in the trees by the water-holes, looking at rest, like toys made by an artist of old Japan; the squatter pigeon, who is frightened of noise, and is paralyzed by a hoof-beat, so that the rider may kill him with a whip; the great jay, useless for man, or bird, or beast, or for himself, who is none of these three; the magpie, who has one note that is the father of all flutes, and a few others which are the mothers of all such as file-saws; the rosella dashed by, a flash of red and gold, screaming like a small locomotive whistle in the excitement of the love chase; the irresponsible tits, crimson breasted and ebony saddled, flirted in the frequent scrub belts.

There was an occasional snake to show that dangers are necessary for an Eden, although the bull-ants were ready to prove that; scores of ‘goannas,’ whose brains are in their stomachs, so that they are always looking for food, and are so eager that they know where it is

by inspiration ; and many jew-lizards, who were so glad that the world had been reprieved that they became almost energetic for half a minute in the day.

Hoskins had the black dog on his shoulders that morning, but all the world was calling him to be merry, and the boundless hope of the consumptive succeeded the consumptive's illimitable despair. As his chin dragged a web, he held the strands, broke the scuttling spider on the horse's neck, and twisted the spider-silk into yarn.

'Ere's a cracker, Daven, for your whip ; them spiders make the best crackers in the world. Give's a match.'

The grasshoppers jumped direct at the riders' faces while the horses were yet two yards away ; and, his memory stirred by the wing-beats on his face and by the sounds of their drumming one wing-case against the other, as token of courtship—the Prodigal spoke on grasshoppers :

'Ain't the world just chock full o' lies ? An' school's the worst. Give us a match. . . . Remember that yarn about the grasshopper comin' round to the bee in the winter askin' for honey ?'

'Yes.'

'Well, course it's a lie. Give us a match ; damn pipe won't light. Grasshoppers don't want honey in winter ; they don't want it any time, but in the winter they're dead. It's a fraud on kids, that is. . . . Give us a match.'

'There's fraud in every game,' said Daven.

Gifford, who had been long silent, responded with something of his old interest in everything :

'Except in our game.'

'Oh, there's roguery in ours, too,' said Hoskins, who had taken him literally. 'The only game there's no roguery in is pullin' a flat-bottom punt against a flood. . . . Give us a match. I talk so much me pipe won't draw.'

They rode on silently for half a mile, and Hoskins saw a hawk go wheeling down to earth, and that opened the well of information again, and set it trickling.

'Once in Swiper's Creek the camps was very bothered with 'awks, so a smart chap there began t' set baits fr 'em: y' know—bits o' meat with a little dynamite inside, an' a fuse. He'd light the fuse an' throw it away, an' the 'awk 'ud pick up the meat and fly away with it, an' in about two minutes off goes the charge an' down comes a shower o' feathers! One day this smart chap thinks he'll put in a bigger charge; so he does, an' the 'awk takes it. But the smart chap had made it too 'eavy, an' the 'awk flies round a bit and then drops it, right where the smart chap an' his dog was standin', lookin' up with their mouths open and their tongues out. The smart chap fetches a yell an' starts runnin' through the scrub, and falls into a water-hole, an' the dog he claps his tail down hard and runs—maybe he's runnin' yet. . . . Give us a match.'

'You smoke matches,' said Daven.

'Yes; when I get talkin', half a box o' matches to a pipe o' terbacker's about my average.'

'Drawing now?'

'Yes . . . I think. I knew a chap at Puffin' Billy's who was always cadgin' matches, so me an' another chap lay a trap for him, an' when he asks us for a match we give him a box. There wasn't any matches

in the box, only two bull-ants—real tigers they were. He commences to talk about the drought and things, an' he opens the box—not lookin' at it, y' know—an' them two bull-ants they run out an' bit him good and strong, an' him clawin' an' yellin' an' us laughin' at him.'

'It cured him of the match trick after that?'

'My oath! . . . Never asked me for no more, anyway. Give us a match.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

‘A dear assurance to be loved by her,
For silence is love’s best interpreter.’

STRALIE had sent Gifford away, and now half blamed him for going. She struggled with her pride for a fortnight, and then wrote him asking that he should explain, if he could; the business-like words almost completely concealing the unwritten tenderness. The letter had no reply, for the reason that Gifford had been away three days before it came to Girofla.

Persuading herself, to cover her own unhappiness, that the slight of silence was intended, she vowed to herself never to be even friendly with any man again, and, to emphasize her too ostentatious forgetfulness of Gifford, she unintentionally became almost tender to Abbey.

Abbey was probably the only really happy one at Coocooroo, excepting Hempel, who was always too busy to be anxious. But his wife felt the coming eviction of all the families, whose breadwinners would soon be workless; and these, who had given a little comfort to their camp-ovens of houses and had struggled to raise patches of cultivation and a few flowers all through the drought, found in the red plain in the

centre of the concentric hills of lime which for three years they had cursed and hated because it seemed to be theirs for ever, a new beauty, and gilded it with a new-discovered love. They forgot all but the little streaks of pleasure that had come there—as a woman who has daily reminded a hard husband of his sins, and so becomes a shrew herself, when he is dead forgets everything but the courtship and the caress; the wild, smothering love of youth; the lover's oaths, learned from a gambler; the self-sacrifice for the beloved, before the world dirtied them both to selfishness; the mingled reverence and desire; and the whispered pleasure in the dark.

And now it seemed almost certain that Coocooroo would close down, and be left to the wallaby, the lizards, and the birds. There was a soft-faced, golden-bearded, spectacled engineer conning qualities and quantities underground. According to his finding, the eviction would have to be immediate and complete, or compromising and gradual; but in any event these families knew that half of them would have to go.

Stralie could have tabulated the various forms of unhappiness in her experience of the next few weeks: the passionate, the tenderly regretful, the revengeful, the self-condemnatory, and that other indefinable unhappiness which romantic women love as animal women like pleasure. And as the tenderly regretful and the happy unhappiness were the two whose obsession of her were most frequent, Abbey was filled with joy and hope; for although not directly encouraging him, and not thinking it possible to herself so to do, there was an air about her at rare moments that said

she knew Gifford's life had been broken by her resentment, that she was sorry for his crime and its consequence, and that no other man should ever be wrecked for love of her.

When Abbey said intently tender things in the wrong place it was always in her mind that Gifford would not have made these errors; and at that she felt like bidding Abbey a permanent farewell, and of sending for the only man she knew she wanted or ever would want. To combat these most excellent, kindly, and Christian feelings comes the vision of a devil—tall, thin, black-gowned, golden-haired, angular of chin, delicate of nose, a little high of cheek-bone, taper of finger, and great, violet, and melting of eye; and another vision of dark-haired, dark-eyed Gifford; and a third vision of the two visions—more marvellous of beauty together than apart—kissing. And at that all Stralie's blood seemed to rush to her brain and then to her face; she felt the insult burn her again, and her maidenly pride, which was half a wifely jealousy, silenced her love, and again spoiled Gifford's happiness and her own.

It was but natural that she should compare them then—the eternal reliability of Abbey, his unwavering fidelity, his heaviness that would never attract temptation, his blindness that would not see temptation when attracted; the mercurial easiness of Gifford, his fiery impulsiveness, his magnetic audacity, his impressionability, alas! Then would come thoughts of Abbey the lover, loving like a middle-aged husband; and of Gifford, who loved like a blade of the fifteenth century—his voice a lute, his words a serenade, all fire, yet with much reverence when passion was not on him; the

sensuous poem celled in his memory for the summer night ; big and protecting and full of bear's warmth when the winds blew keen ; ready with delicate conceits that women mistake for the speeches of the true romance, because they lend to passion a name polite, an innocence light and subtle as a perfume ; a man who could lead men, and thus give fame to the woman who could lead the leader, or think she led him ; and, more, a man whom she felt was her complement, brain, body, and heart—made for her, and so hers by natural right.

At that stage she softened again to the absent, meditated his recall ; again conjured up the vision of Mrs. Millenet and the wrecking kiss ; thought again of the beauty of the lady, and, instead of excusing Gifford with the fact, used it to charge him with a new crime ; finally tortured Gifford's involuntary silence into another offence ; turned to Abbey as a friend, found him a lover, and turned away again ; and so pendulized between heaven and earth, with the possibility of falling into hell.

Had Abbey been more highly strung, more imaginative, and therefore more able to see facts as they are—for imagination is necessary to surely grasp even fixed and measurable rules—his life would have been similarly miserable. But he was in love, and so duller than naturally ; and when Stralie did not treat him with marked coldness he was happy.

Mrs. Hempel had, in the interests of the bespectacled engineer who wished to see the caves, arranged a picnic to Girofla, and she gave Stralie a little advice thereon.

‘ Now, Stralie, Frank will drive you, and the expert

man will go in the buggy with me. I've got all the others fixed up.'

'But isn't there a seat for me in your buggy?'

'No, there isn't. Give poor old Frank a chance, there's a dear!'

'I'll go with him, but it's no use, May: I won't marry.'

'You will.'

'I won't marry him, anyhow.'

'You will, dear. Women are creatures of circumstances. You've simply got to be married. Here, you are twenty-three.'

'I don't care if I'm thirty-four.'

'Nobody does when they're not. Now, be a dear, and don't say "No," will you, to oblige me?'

'But after I'm married I'd have to live with him, even if it didn't oblige me.'

'He's a good fellow, Stralie, better than the other—you know, not so fascinating; but that's all the better. Other women won't run after him.'

'Oh, May, May! you shock me,' said Stralie, who was not at all shocked, but wanted to be alone.

'Do I? Well, I'll go; but don't say "No" this time.'

Mere human pleasure in the day made her bright and ready to please, as Abbey drove her in his light buggy, whose weight was a plaything to the two horses, well ahead of the procession of brakes, dogcarts, buckboards, and horsemen and horsewomen who rode out from Coocooroo to the picnic. The fig-tree, the bottle-tree, the myrtle, and the wait-a-bit thorn, showed their new green against the blue-gray of the lime ranges that bore them; the lime pigeons uttered that turtle-dove note which

had made the imaginative discoverer give the field the name of Coocooroo as he lay in his blankets on the first night of discovery, and heard the half-awake and brooding birds.

And everywhere the teeming life in earth, and tree, and air, that Gifford had found further west: the plains below the lime had become great parterres; every tree, and grass, and shrub, rising into leaf and flower, and hurrying to seed-time and generation.

Stralie enjoyed that drive because she was dreaming with visions, imagining Gifford in Abbey's place; and Abbey thought the softness was for him and was radiant with happiness. The drive was all too short: the four miles to Emu Rock were covered as in a moment; the four miles from Emu Rock to the great pinnacled range of marble, named Westminster Abbey by the sponsor of Coocooroo, were even shorter.

'How did they find the caves?' asked Stralie as Abbey pulled up the horses and swung the fore-carriage of the buggy for her to alight.

'See those big fig-trees?'

'Yes.'

'Wherever there's a fig-tree there's a cave. The fig-trees won't grow anywhere else, but they grow at every cave mouth, and send their roots all over the place, looking for water.'

'Isn't it wonderful?'

'Everything is wonderful,' said Abbey enthusiastically, looking at her whom he thought the greatest marvel of all; and all was marvellous that day, as she had said.

She did not look away from his admiring gaze, because she was not stirred by it; she only said for the sake of

lifting the embarrassment : 'Are there many caves, Mr. Abbey ?'

'Hundreds discovered ; only a score or so explored. Where you see the ranges weathered into round shapes there are no caves, only where they are worn into spires like Westminster Abbey.'

'Why is that ?'

'Because the caves are all in the purest limestone, and the purer the limestone, the less rounded.'

Stralie had a great respect for all knowledge, and she looked at him with a new interest, and he returned the gaze so hungrily that she looked away again—back to the road they had come, where the long line of horses and vehicles grew suddenly from toy size into their real shapes.

Mrs. Hempel managed well. There were reorganizations of parties during the day, but Stralie remained Abbey's exclusive charge. He helped her over the talus of shattered marble that made a ramp from the plain to the cave entrance, a hundred feet above ; after they had entered the cave—vaster than a cathedral and as cold—she twice half-rested in his arms a moment, as they descended to the cave-floor, which was a little below the level of the plain. Above them the great walled heights and spaces, first eaten out by water and then a little redeposited, rose into darkness.

Stralie called to the main party, whose candles and occasional bursts of red fire showed them climbing a narrow shelf a hundred feet above ; but Mrs. Hempel answered for all, shouting :

'We'll come down afterwards, dear : don't you worry ;' and Abbey blessed her, and Stralie's eyes grew hard for a moment.

They watched the far-off candles glimmer, like damp match-heads, until the party far above turned an angle of the cave and were lost to view. Abbey lit some red fire and showed her a bewildering range of form and tint—a dazzling white crystallization, walls rugged and water-smoothed, coralline drapes and curtains, white or stained by iron to a golden brown—gray and white where there was no direct communication with the upper air, lavender and orange where there was.

She looked without seeing, angry at this pitchforking into the arms of the twice-rejected, and he saw her face as the Bengal light burned to a fume, and set himself to amuse her in a ridiculous hurry, as an old bachelor tries to comfort a crying child.

‘Would you like to know what caused the caves, Miss Field?’

‘The red fire flamed again, and she replied listlessly: ‘Oh, yes!’

‘Well, you see, the water carrying carbon dioxide, dissolves the limestone, and redeposits some of it drop by drop. That is what causes the stalagmites and the stalactites.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. Do you know what carbon dioxide is?’

‘Oh, yes.’

She did not know, but, truth to tell, she had not heard him, being intent on her resentment of the unsports-woman-like conduct of Mrs. Hempel, and the necessity of a woman to beware of women.

Abbey looked at her astounded, but too polite to force an explanation after her direct avowal. He showed her the stalactites slowly forming drop by drop, and broke one, saying :

‘I can tell you the age of this by counting the rings of growth. Each ring shows a wet season. You can almost see how one year had a bigger rainfall than another.’

He lit more red fire, and led her to an ascending shelf of rock, showed her that these shelves were of cave-earth—not limestone, but cave-earth—mixed with the bones of bats and snails and wallaby, cemented into a solid floor by carbonate of lime. There Stralie lost all her resentment, and became suddenly tender as she trod that adamantine mosaic of tiny skeletons, and said:

‘Poor things! poor things!’

The red fire burned out again, and Abbey put out a guarding hand and caught her arm.

‘What a soft heart you have!’ he said, his voice thrilled by admiration. ‘Why, they died thousands of years ago.’

‘What does it matter? Poor things! all the same.’ She put her hand before her, and uttered a little shriek, but immediately recovered her self-possession.

‘Oh, Mr. Abbey, light a candle! I’ve put my hand on a creepy thing like a spider’s web.’

He lit the candle, and they gasped in admiration. Her bogey was a green wonder of moss, curtaining the brown wall, and as filmy as a spider-web, and near it a great tortuous fig-tree root dropped over the shelf and into the darkness, searching for water.

Stralie lit her candle from the flame of Abbey’s, and they went on to the end of the shelf, and came to a great pulpit of crystalline limestone, with an occasional stain of copper carbonate, efflorescent, as if fallen on the coralline surface from a height and splashed, like a gout of green blood.

Columns polished like old ivory extended from the

unseen floor far below to the roof high above in invisibility; curtains, folded with the precise regularity of human hands, came from the darkness down to a basin, draped in liquid shapes, as if a cascade of milk had been suddenly arrested and frozen as it fell.

‘How beautiful! Oh, how beautiful!’ said Stralie.

‘This is the last red fire we have,’ said Abbey. He lit it, and the splendour leaped into a new magnificence—this mountain that had once been liquid, these marvels of solidity that water had once borne in solution and gravitation had chiselled in their fall.

‘Oh! it’s everything, isn’t it, Mr. Abbey—Milan Cathedral, and Westminster Abbey, and St. Peter’s, and the Pantheon, and Nôtre Dame?’

Their shadows filled the enormous cavern, showing them as gigantic bipeds of two hundred feet high; their voices found echoes in unknown branches of the cave a mile away, and in little flutings and convolutions by their elbows. And Stralie looked and saw all the beauty, and Abbey looked—and saw Her.

‘See these curtains? Each has a different tone; so this is called the Organ Cave.’

He struck the fold of marble with his knuckles, and immediately floated from above a sound surrounding—not merely majestic, but ravishingly sweet, unearthly dulcet; not a tone to fire the blood, but one to bend the neck of pride and fill the stubborn soul with peace.

Stralie was softened almost to tears by it, having been overwrought, first by her anger and then by the quiet and the darkness; and then she moved a step, and crushed some glassy organisms beneath her feet, and felt she had killed something, and at that she put forth her hands and caught Abbey’s coat.

He soothed her, forgetting even his pursuit of her in her distress, and brought his candle to the floor.

‘See! it’s all right,’ he said. ‘It’s only the shells of dead snails. There was a little pool there, and they died when the water dried up. There are millions of ’em there.’

‘The poor things!’

This petty tragedy of the drought, the slow death of these low organisms, retreating from the outer air to the damp darkness as the sun blistered all moisture from the earth, seemed to her sadder than the martyrdom of the herds, because the life of the over-world was not strange to her. Here every little hint of pain or death in this more than cloistral gloom seemed more terrible than did pain or death itself in the free air beneath the sun.

‘Shall we go further or wait here?’ he asked; and she replied, terrified of the loneliness:

‘No, no! we’ll wait here. They said they wouldn’t be long.’

He found a seat for her on a raised shelf by the organ, seated himself beside her, and talked a great deal of nothing; and at intervals struck the curtains and filled the cave with harmony.

‘They’re staying a long time, Mr. Abbey,’ she said impatiently.

‘Yes, longer than I thought they’d be; and these are all the candles we have.’

‘What then?’

‘If they don’t return soon and we have to find our way out, we’ve only light enough for that.’

‘Then put them out.’

He blew out the candles in a great hurry. He had been waiting for the order, and now they sat in the

Cimmerian darkness, so close together that their arms touched as they moved, in a silence almost Venetian, so that they were reminded that the normal condition of the ear is listening to sound; and they listened until their ears ached for the familiar noises that were not in this windless, lifeless grave. There was the dripping of lime-laden water through the dark and silent depths; the last faint echo of the marvellous blend of tones from the marble harp, wandering in the secret places of the hollow mountain.

In silence there is born an antipathy, or a sympathy, rarely an indifference; and when it was broken by the deep tone of a thicker curtain that Abbey struck with the side of his hand, and Stralie was startled thereby, she let her hand, that he had taken prisoner, remain clasped by his, and seemed to be glad of the protection.

‘Stralie.’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you never take pity on me?’

‘How can I?’

‘You know how. Will you never forget—him?’

‘No, never.’

She hardened again, and tried to withdraw her hand, and he secretly cursed himself for the false move of speaking the name of the other.

‘Stralie, I can’t live happily without you. I’m full of health and strength, but life is no good to me without you.’

‘I’ll never marry anybody.’

‘You must. If Mrs. Hempel were to die, you haven’t one really true friend in the world.’

In her heart Stralie sarcastically thanked the only ‘really true friend in the world’ for betraying her to

this surprise, yet, strange to say, she softened to Abbey even more, although she replied :

‘ I am sufficient for myself.’

‘ No, dear, you’re not. Few men are ; no woman can be. You don’t hate me, do you ?’

‘ No, of course not. I like you, but I don’t love you.’

‘ But if I’m satisfied with your *liking* me, dear ?’

‘ It isn’t you only that’s to be satisfied. I have to look forward to—what ?’

‘ To life with a man you don’t really love, but who loves you better than any other man can.’

‘ And does it make such a difference to you ?’

‘ Difference ! Good God ! it’s all the difference between night and day.’

She was sorry for him, and became even more sorry as she felt that the passion which shook this man and made the darkness vibrant merely chilled her, and that there was not one responsive fibre in her body. And then somehow he wrought on her pity and her patience, so that at last she replied :

‘ Well, it shall be so ; but if I find it’s too much for me, I’m to be free to give you up.’

‘ Yes, yes ! I agree : anything—anything !’

He had her in his arms at last ; he kissed her, and she tried not to be unresponsive, though she thought the caresses stupid and tiresome, and felt that his presence suffocated her ; and he did not know what she thought, and tried to soften her by caresses and promises.

And then they heard the hum of far-off voices, and saw a glare of distant red fire upon the milk-white basin as the returning explorers descended seemingly

from the clouds. Abbey settled into a deep, quiet happiness as they met the party. Stralie dropped her glance, afraid and half ashamed of what she had done. Mrs. Hempel noted the differences of demeanour of the important two, and smiled, as Hannibal might have smiled hot from a conquest.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AT a creek shaped like a V, by reason of the gneissic range it flowed around, Gifford had made his camp distant a week's ride from Girofla. They had been camped there for ten days, every day making the finding of the fierce-eyed man's pet lode more improbable by narrowing the area of search. Yet had they postponed abandonment of the quest until the range and its vicinity had been ransacked, for the old prospector's fixed idea of his great mine had suffered no modification as they had neared their journey's end; rather had he waxed more enthusiastic.

On the seventh day of the search Hoskins' weakened body refused to carry him on the day-long climbs and ramblings in the ranges, now that faith in the story of the prospector had deserted him. He stayed by the camp, fishing for the little white fish, whose five square forts on either side give them the name of Ten-gun Brigs, resting himself in the divine air—very hot, clear, and thin—his broken lungs apparently mending themselves, and giving him again the childlike hope of the consumptive, who will assuredly, and in the face of all peril, walk to the foot of the rainbow—to-morrow.

For days his work had been of mingled small pleasures and great irritations—the catching of the Ten-gun Brigs that had miraculously survived the furnace of

the long drought to rush blindly on a thinly-disguised hook; the watching of the gorgeous bird-life that came to the water, and the protection of the food and of the camp against the millions of rats that came from God knows where, and overran the country like a bush-fire. If life and beauty had come to the rejuvenated earth, so also had horror. The new green world was dirtied and blackened by flies, that drove men and horses frantic.

Half a score of miles from camp that day Gifford, Daven, and Phelan, the fierce little prospector, forced their way through the tall new growth to a rugged-riven mountain in the west, and each man was escorted by flies in millions. Daven wore a fly-veil; his love of open air made unendurable to him the gossamer bag that Gifford wore, because his fine skin was irritated by even the approach of the little black fiends that preyed on everything—living or dead.

Phelan had lived this life so long, and had been so coarse at the beginning, that now he had almost the indifference of the black to the plague. He wore no veil; his old hat was pierced around the rim, and at half-inch intervals with lengths of ravelled boot-elastic, each piece suspending a bobbing segment of cork—a contrivance of some effect in normal seasons, but valueless now that the flies were fearless and millionous. Long habit had given him the folded eyelid of the black, so that as the flies swarmed on his face he closed the lids until the sight was not an eye, but a slit with a gleam in it.

Gifford, his head enclosed in the gossamer bag provided by the forethought of Johnson, was free of flies, but almost suffocated. They climbed the teeming

ridges silently, wanting all their breath for work. The innumerable variants of life sprang from them and at them as they approached: the spear-grass, breast-high and still growing, put forth new leaves and broke immature spears against and in the travellers' clothing—springing so quickly that it might almost be seen in the act, budding to be heard, growing as if it would never grow again—as if to-day were the last day, and to-morrow the world's end. Song and chirp and creak and rustle and whirr! An insect as big as a dewdrop calling to an insect the size of a daisy to hurry up and save the solar system; great grasshoppers in an insanity of fear whirring in the faces of the men, who cursed the endless blows; everywhere the boundless egotism of self-preservation and the colossal conceit of reproduction.

They reached the summit of the last ridge, and saw before them a change of country—a slope that half-way down its course lost all the greenness, and became almost as arid and unfruitful as pumice, with infrequent blooms of broom and hummocks of amaranth to show the desert it was. A little wind sprang up, and brought to them the pollen of amaranth and broom, so that as they left the limits of the green scrub they breathed at intervals the fibrous air of a rope-factory. The scarred and fissured mountain lifted its heights of limestone from a talus of boulders, and as they crossed it Phelan cried:

‘This is it!’

His companions grunted disappointedly.

‘Yes, that's the hill, and there's a bottle-tree—there's the bottle-tree!’

He went on quickly, rounded the knee of the mountain, and showed them a great gorge overhung

by trees at its neck, and shiny from cave drippings. He stopped at a shallow hole, and said with the grandeur of a man discovering a continent: 'And here's the lode.'

Gifford and Daven looked at the metallic greenness in the little excavation, and were too disgusted for speech.

The fierce little man talked on excitedly.

'Here she is!' said he—'three 'undred feet wide!'

'You mean the lime is three 'undred feet wide?'

He turned on them his madly-gleaming eyes.

'I don't—strike me crossways if I do! I mean the lode!'

'But it's not a foot wide.'

'Send I may live! she's three 'undred feet wide!'

'And how long?' asked Gifford ironically.

'A mile an' a half—every inch of it.'

Daven looked at Gifford, and his lips formed the words, 'He really believes it. He's mad.'

But Phelan, if he understood the message, made no sign, but continued in rapture:

'All she wants is a little sinkin' on, an' there you are. Y' could have yer works down there, an'—there must be plenty o' water in sinkin'.'

'How many tons d'ye think are here?' said Daven, humouring him.

''Bout a million. How many do *you* say?'

'No tons at all; about five hundredweight.'

Phelan looked at him murderously, but contented himself by saying, with all the glibness of the certain idiot in recognising the possibly insane:

'Yer off yer onion, mister!' Then to Gifford: 'Come up an' see her where she crops on the hill.'

Gifford, with the usual desire to know the worst,

agreed, and they climbed a precipitous ridge, whose declivities were flanked by great cool-looking fig-trees. When Phelan stopped again they stood on the summit of the gray-blue range. A few bottle-trees and clumps of wait-a-bit thorn grew around them; the magnolia green of the fig-trees in the gorges, and behind them, rolling away interminably to the range where they had made their camp, the sap-green of the new scrub that had bred the plague of flies. And there on the summit Phelan's 'mine' was even more ridiculous than it had seemed at the first place of seeing.

They watched him narrowly while he ranted of the wealth of the barren rock that lay beneath them. They followed him silently down the range to where the flies took possession of them again, accompanying them in black clouds up the gorge to its neck, where the fig-trees grew so quickly that the air was half dark and cool, and the flies less energetic.

'There's another lode ought to be in here, but I ain't struck it yet,' said Phelan.

'But why ought it to be here?'

He explained as laboriously as obscurely, and Gifford, releasing his head from the gossamer in respite from the heat, entered a great cave below the fig-trees to escape the flies.

Daven lighted a candle and followed. Their feet sank in the fragments of tiny skeletons. There came to them a sound as of thousands of young cockatoos screeching to be fed, and of the flapping of fleshy wings, as the colonies of flying foxes, hanging head downwards from rock-ridges, and the invading roots of fig-trees, were startled by the light or jostled by each other. The irritation of the flies in the clean air was

preferable to the stench of all this obscene life. They adjusted their veils again and left the cave, and went down the mountain with their torturing retinue.

By the strip of everlasting flowers Phelan halted and demanded, in a half-threatening tone :

‘Where ’ll we put the pegs in?’

‘Nowhere for me,’ said Daven.

‘Nor for me,’ said Gifford.

‘Think ye’ve got me, eh? Think yer goin’ t’ get me out o’ the way, an’ peg it out yerself, an’ do me out o’ me reg’lars, eh?’

‘I wouldn’t buy the lot for tuppence,’ said Daven.

‘Nor I,’ said Gifford. ‘You may have it all. We are going back to camp.’

‘Then you go first. I’m not goin’ to be swindled. The show’s mine.’

They laughed at him, and he grew maniacal as they laughed, lengthened his grip of his tomahawk, and attacked a sapling. Seeing that he really intended to cut pegs, they left him, and passed into the green scrub, and there the clouds of flies were increased fivefold.

When they reached camp they found that Hoskins had rounded up the hobbled horses and lighted fires to disperse the torture of the insects; for now as the night drew on the flies were recruited by swarms of mosquitoes from the creek. The horses, once unhobbled, trotted to the fires and ranged themselves in the smoke. Their hides were covered with flies and mosquitoes, that abandoned them as the smoke of green bushes and horse-dung made the air acrid. Hoskins ran his hand along the belly of his own horse and drew it away bloodied.

‘Any better luck, Giff?’

‘No, old man—worse. We found his show. The man’s mad.’

‘Didn’t I tell y’ so?’

‘Oh, don’t say “I told you so”! You told us all right, of course; but don’t say you said it.’ This from the usually equipoised Daven, made irascible by fly-bites and disappointment.

Hoskins laughed and began the preparation of the meal, setting out the tins of meat and the onions, and breaking the ashes and producing a damper the size of a bicycle-wheel; making the tea while Gifford and Daven washed the grime of the day from their faces.

The sun set in his usual hurry, and the temperature dropped the usual twenty degrees; a cool wind sprang up and strengthened, so that the mosquitoes were driven into quiescence with the flies, who had stopped biting immediately after sunset.

The change of air brought a fierce appetite with it; veils and hats were doffed; the three ate heartily as they sprawled by the fire, Gifford on his side, Hoskins on his belly, Daven half reclining against his swag; for these bushmen had found in the habits of primitiveness the highest civilization, and ate luxuriously as the old Romans did, accumbent and at ease.

‘Wonder what the mad bloke’s doin’?’ said Hoskins interrogatively.

‘He’s pegging out his new Broken Hill,’ replied Gifford. ‘He thought we were trying to bluff him out of it.’

‘Well, I told yer he was mad, an’ Jim Johnson told yer he was mad; but yer wouldn’t take any notice of me, would yer?’

'Oh, shut up! It's enough to have had this trip for nothing, without being told of it.'

Hoskins opened his mouth to reply, but at the moment there was a rustling in the scrub, and the figure of Phelan showed as a moving shadow in the starlight, and became solid as he walked into the glare of the fires. He did not appear to notice them, but picked up his own quart-pot and walked to the water.

'Hallo! is that you?' cried Hoskins.

'S'pose it is,' replied the now morose Phelan, still walking towards the water-hole.

'Thought I see yer.'

'S'pose yer did—if yer can see.'

'There's plenty o' tea made.'

'Never mind; I'll make my own.'

'Seems to think we'll poison him,' said Daven, as Phelan's shape became shadow again.

'That's it, Jack. He thinks we're trying to steal his rotten mine.'

Phelan returned to the fire and put the quart pot on, and then he asked for the can-opener.

'What d'yer want that for? There's plenty o' good meat open.'

'I'll 'ave another tin, I tell yer. I won't eat after nobody.'

Hoskins gave him the can-opener, and the three sat silent as he opened the meat and skinned an onion, and after some little thought decided to trust to their honesty in the matter of bread. He talked to himself all the time, and they, determined not to notice his smouldering anger, let him mutter threats without interruption.

'The blasted toffs think they've got Bill Phelan, do

they? Be Cripes, we'll see! . . . Shake a man's mine, will they? . . . I'll show 'em they've caught a cat-fish when they catch me! . . . Race 'em to the Warden's in the mornin' I will, be Cripes! . . . Jew a man out uv his reg'lars, would they?'

At last the three sane men wearied of him and talked among themselves, but at intervals the voice of the man of the fixed idea broke in on them. At last Hoskins rose, kicked the embers together, and said to Phelan:

'Go t' hell! Y' ain't stopped skitin' while we've bin smokin' two pipes.'

'T' hell yourself!' He resumed the muttered threats as he spread his blankets.

'Turning in early?' asked Gifford kindly.

'Turnin' in when I like,' replied Phelan truculently. 'Free country, ain't it? A man can do as he likes, eh?'

'Yes, as long as he doesn't do what other people don't like.'

'My troubles what anybody likes. . . . They'd play the double on a man, would they?— A lot o' twicers—twicers; that's what they are—a dirty lot o' nine-teeners!'

He removed his boots, drew a blanket over him, lit his pipe, and looked at the star-sown firmament as if *it* had offended him.

The three mates made their beds a dozen yards from him, blessing the night winds and the deep liquid-looking sky that dropped coolness on them, but placing their mosquito-nets handy, in readiness for the stilling of the wind, which would bring back the mosquitoes ripe for bloodshed.

They lay there smoking, the night and the tobacco mingling the perfection of animal enjoyment; and after

half an hour the fierce prospector brought them out of dreams as he put his pipe safely in the sand.

‘I’ll best ’em!’ said he. ‘A dirty lot o’ twicers! I’ll beat two cart-loads o’ water out o’ them.’

With this benign statement he turned over and slept.

Hoskins listened for a moment, spat, and gave his opinion.

‘Listen t’ him. That ’ll show you the man he is. Not a quiet breather, like a pretty woman; or a snorer, like a man that’s a good doer; but buzzin’ away to hisself like a blasted pussy-cat!’

The three addressed themselves to sleep as the night closed down on them, and the sky seemed to sink to within a foot of their faces.

But it was a broken sleep for all. The night always brought to Gifford his heart-hunger that now seemed permanent; the imminence of the homeward track called all Daven’s uxoriousness into life; and Hoskins opened his eyes at every other minute, and looked dully at the nearness of the sky, for his life-forces were at their lowest, and his old habit of uproarious life made the difference the greater.

CHAPTER XL

AN hour before daylight Phelan awoke, listened for a moment, and was satisfied that the three were in deep sleep—deeper than usual by reason of their night having been broken by momentary waking and more than momentary dreams.

Phelan lay for a minute looking at the sky, arose from his blankets and shook himself like a big dog after a swim, buckled his belt and put his boots on, so making his toilet for the day. He rolled his swag and strapped quart-pot and tomahawk to it, took his saddle and bridle from the projecting scrub, looked at the sleeping men and chuckled, and stepped out briskly on the home track eastward. When the wind began to blow the horses had been hobbled and started to the grass half a mile away. Phelan found them before dawn, caught them all and unhobbled them, saddled his own horse, mounted it, and drove the others before him till they broke from him in the last darkness before daylight.

The sun was waxing strong when Hoskins stirred and coughed, and so awoke his mates.

Davení lay there luxuriously; for the mosquito-nets, donned half unconsciously in the night, hid them from the attacks of the fly legions—already busy on another predatory day.

He and Gifford started into complete consciousness when Hoskins cried : ' Hello ! Where's the lunatic ? Why, he's gorn—no swag, no quart-pot, no saddle. He's gorn.'

The others laughed.

' Plain as Wilson's Promontory,' said Daven. ' He's racing us to the Warden's.'

' Just imagine the fool thinking we want a shyster mine like that, Jack.'

' Good job he's gone. He's mad.'

' Only on this point, Jack. He's an exaggerated optimist.'

' That's mad enough. Hell was made for these mad optimists, so they can say to each other : " Good job it's no worse : the temperature's only 212 Fahrenheit." '

' Well, breakfast, boys, and then a week's ride east.'

While the billy boiled and Hoskins washed himself in shallow water the two healthy men stripped and swam and dived in the big rock pool, to the great fear of the Ten-gun Brig fish, and robbed the flies of their just dues by dressing from head to waist as they stood in waist-deep water. As they returned to the sputtering billy-can they ran and wrestled, forgetting in the joy of manhood and of being alive the wants and memories that had oppressed them in the night.

Hoskins looked on at the horse-play, and was sorry for himself, thinking of the strength that had once been his, the strength that was his snare.

' What sort of a night did you have, Ned ?' asked Gifford kindly, stopping the horse-play, as the wide sympathy that was as searching as a feminine intuition told him that the pride of the strong is the sorrow of the weak.

‘Me? A night that was very out and in. Gotta firm sleep about three o’clock.’

‘Sorry for that, old man.’

‘I know; but neither of you was doin’ too good yourselves.’

‘How?’ asked Daven, as guiltily as if he knew the answer to his own question.

‘Oh-ho! I got over all them times meself; but you two—well——’

‘I wasn’t talking, was I?’ said Daven.

‘Ho no! Not a little bit! It *was* a night for me. Just ’s I’d be goin’ off to sleep I’d hear you sayin’, “Luce! Luce!”’

Daven blushed violently.

‘An’ you sayin’: “Darlin’, forgive me.”’

Gifford reddened in his turn.

‘An’ no chance for a good camp did I ’ave—Jack ’ere dreamin’ o’ the wife, an’ Giff thinkin’ o’ the maid.’

‘I suppose you’ve done that in your time, too?’

Hoskins chuckled conceitedly. ‘No fear! In my time the women used to lie awake, singin’ out, “Oh! Ned, Ned!”’

‘And what did you think about last night?’ demanded Daven, in a suspiciously swift attempt to turn the tables. But the sick man answered him without a tremor.

‘Me? I was thinkin’ o’ times—good times—when I was good an’ strong; of tracks I been, an’ men I knoo, and the ol’ mother I left in Poplar seven-an’-thirty year ago.’

This was going too far on the road to sentiment, and Gifford, knowing it, put his hand on Hoskins’ shoulder, saying: ‘We’re making east, Ned! Bring on the breakfast, and we’ll get the horses after.’

The three sat down, ashamed of having been trapped into sentiment, two of them with the additional ignominy of being convicted of talking in their sleep.

Breakfast over, Gifford and Daven set out to look for the horses, and tracked them to where they had been unhobbled by Phelan, whom they impotently cursed, and thence to a gully twelve miles away, so that they did not return to Hoskins till sundown, after a terrible day of rambling longer than the actual distance, and of fly tortures more terrible than usual. The journey had to be deferred till next dawn. They slept that night the sleep of weariness—Hoskins was not awakened by cries for either maid or wife—and at sunrise they were riding eastward.

It was a long week of distance, and plague of mice, and plague of flies, of suffering an eye-soreness from the assault of myriads of frightened grasshoppers that leaped always to the height of the riders' eyes. On the fifth day Daven, who carried the compass, bore away from the line of their outward journey, saying he could save thereby twenty miles. The others agreed silently for friendship of him, although by this time they were weary of the forced marches he persuaded them to make, the late camps and the early starts that wore Hoskins out. Daven's haste to be with his wife again made him as unsparing of himself as he was cruel to his horses and to his mates. That afternoon they reached great plains of spear-grass, so tall that a man riding ahead—who was always Daven—could not be seen ten feet away. Once Daven dismounted for a moment, and Hoskins, with the crude humour of the Bush, tied the grass over the horse's neck, so that when Daven remounted he was almost scraped out of the saddle by the knotted grass, and had his shirt filled with spears.

They had ridden so hard that the seven days' journey promised to be done in six, and that night in camp Daven said the promise would be fulfilled.

'It's no use protesting against the madness of a love-struck man,' said Gifford, with the suspicion of a sneer.

'Quite right, mate—that's a bull's-eye!' said Hoskins, joining forces against the uxorious one.

'I knew a love-struck man once,' said Daven, who had felt the sneer, 'and if he'd been as quick getting back to his as I am to mine, it would have been better for him.'

Then these two blood-brothers were cool to one another for quite ten minutes. Hoskins made a diversion: as usual, he was always the blessed peacemaker, who would curse men into conciliation, if he failed to persuade them. While the interchange of courtesies had been in the making the three men had been engaged on an occupation that to a man unused to the spear-grass country would have made the half-sentimental quarrel ludicrous.

The day's ride had, as usual, filled them with the grass spears; and they sat around the fire half-naked and picked the spears from everything they had worn that day—hat, shirt, trousers, leggings, and boots; and as they picked Hoskins talked.

'I been countin' these damn grass-seeds, an' I lost count at two million an' two. What d'ye think o' that, Jack?'

'I think I'm sore with 'em from my ears to my feet,' replied Daven a little sulkily.

'Well, it's no good cursin' 'em; 'tain't their fault, it's Nature's. Y' see, Nature says, "Hello! I remember I ain't got no spear-grass east of Eclipse Corner. 'Ere's these chaps ridin' maybe down's far as Desdermona;

they'll most likely stop an' pull the spears out an' throw 'em away, an' then nex' season," says ole Missus Nature, "I'll 'ave spear-grass down to Bunderoon."

'But we're not carrying the seeds to Eclipse Corner—we're chucking 'em away here.'

'Ah! now that's where we're gettin' at Nature. But never you mind; the ole gal 'ull stick some more into us to-morrow!'

Daven looked at Gifford and laughed, and Gifford looked back at Daven and laughed, and then Hoskins looked at them both, and the three laughed together.

Two hours before the dawn Daven awoke them, and Hoskins coughed and Gifford was indignant.

'D'ye wan't to kill him, Jack?'

'You know I don't, George; but I must go—I can't rest. You two follow.'

He had finished his preparations and was about to mount when Hoskins hailed him.

'Wait a bit—I'm comin'!'

'And so am I,' said Gifford, springing from his blankets. 'Except for a sick man I won't let a mate go alone.'

'No—not much!' pursued Hoskins, 'even if the mate is off his chump.'

He rose, still coughing, walked to a stunted tree, and held it until the fit passed. Daven dismounted and helped them to strap their gear and saddle the horses; and as Hoskins sang between his recurrent fits of coughing,

'Oh! love it is a very funny thing,
An' it 'urts both the young and the old.'

Daven swore at an unwilling pack-horse, and pretended not to hear.

They rode sleepily through spear-grass and stunted trees, and broke spider-webs strong as pack-thread ; and just before dawn the spear-grass ended and they crossed a bouldery river, just fordable, although driftwood was packed in the tree-forks fifty feet above.

And as the sun rose and struck the little plain that succeeded the river, all the world seemed to burst into scent, and the love of these open-air men for all beauty banished the meanness of the dawn.

‘Smell that,’ said Gifford, as if the scents were coming one after another like sounds. ‘That’s citrodora.’

‘Scented gum, y’ mean,’ interposed Hoskins, half contemptuously.

‘Same thing, old man ! And that’s banksia, and that’s—that’s everything all at once.’

‘Lord knows what it all is, George ; but isn’t it great ?’

‘Lord luv a duck ! it’s splendid !’ said the consumptive, arching his chest, opening his nostrils, and coughing.

‘Now, wasn’t it worth while getting up for this, George ?’

‘Worth ! I should say it was !’

Hoskins laughed. ‘You’re a cunnin’ bloke, Jack. Bimeby ye’ll say yer knew this was here, and you wasn’t hurrying, to get home to the missus.’

Daven laughed nervously, but did not reply. The horses lifted their heads to the sweet smells ; the three men rode along intoxicated.

‘I’ll call this Perfume Plain,’ said Gifford decisively, as they left the flat for another crossing of the river.

‘Perfoom be damned !’ said Hoskins. ‘You call it what yer like ; *I* call it Scenty Patch.’

By nightfall they made Girofla, entered by the horses at a speed born of the belief that here was the end of the journey—a belief replaced by a half-despair when the overridden animals discovered that they must go to Coocooroo, even though the heavens should fall and the moon turn to blood ; for Daven's wife had wearied of the mild excitements of Jimmy Johnson's and the caves, and had left for Coocooroo.

So to Coocooroo they went, feeling very strangely on the traffic-scarred roads, and knowing long before they saw the town that they were near to many houses, as a savage knows when a stranger has broken a leaf from a tree, or a horse feels fear before he sees a cause. Hoskins, worn out, had stayed at Johnson's, and the two mates rode as hard as the horses would carry them. The Flash, tireless as ever, made the pace for Daven's weary gelding, his ears acock, his beautiful head reaching at the bridle, his gleaming teeth feeling for his chain-reins to bite them asunder.

Outside the town they heard the murmurs of the town in its sleep—the subtle, ever-present susurrance that belongs to any agglomeration of humans ; the sound the town-bred man never knows of because he is too used to it, and whose existence would never be suspected but for the evidence of the men of the open air, who can hear the larva moving in its chrysalis and know the desert silences.

CHAPTER XLI

FOR Daven, Coocooroo held home and beauty ; for Gifford, loneliness and a new surprise. He was about to call on Stralie for a dismissal absolutely final, when he heard of her engagement to Abbey, and that decided him. In this heightened loneliness all his desires were towards the one friend who wanted him ; for Daven, his one-time David, had he not married a wife—in the kind of marriage that, temporarily at least, takes most of the strength out of friendship ? Gifford had known a man who wrote well before he married, but after marriage wrote not a line, being of a weakness that permitted but one pursuit at a time ; and now he thought of that man much in the same way as he regarded Daven, though less kindly.

He called at Daven's hotel, and, well knowing the answer, told Daven of the necessity of returning to the open, and asked Daven if he would be of the party. To this the married man replied in great trepidation that he would be glad to go again, only the wife—well, you know—wanted him to stay with her and go back to the South ; and Graham had written there was a certain constituency for him, and a sure thing for Gifford also, if he cared to come.

Gifford replied that he was very grateful to Graham, but the smash had left him too hard-up for politics,

and there was Hoskins to be considered, and they might strike something good on the next trip. He wished Daven all good luck, and supposed he might as well saddle up and go away now. So these two friends parted, Daven feeling like a traitor, and regretting the wounding of the old friendship by the healing of the new love.

Gifford's return to Girofla was in such a perfection of road and weather that The Flash was even more joyously mad than usual, and the pride of the horse entered into the rider, so that the centaur forgot the sorrows of the man; and when he arrived his pleasure in finding a continued improvement in Hoskins still kept care away.

He inquired of Phelan, and an inquiry was all Johnson wanted to make him talk his hearers to a standstill.

'The bloke with the white eye? Yes, he come here two days afore you did, an' his horse lay down in the paddock as soon as they took the saddle off him, an' didn't get up again till yesterdee. He's gone out again.'

'Back to his big mine?'

'Yes, with another bloke, a chap from the South, what wears a heye-glass an' dog-poisoner leggin's—them yellor English things, ye know. He polishes his nails with a little file and a shammy leather after every meal.'

'A new chum?'

'Well, what do you think? Seems that Phelan got this bloke to put up the money for the lease, an' give a bit besides. Then he goes round shoutin' an' makin' a name for himself at the pubs, an' because the people he was shoutin' for didn't make enough o' him he gets

obstropulous with a knife ; so the sergeant at Coocooroo puts him on the chain, an' after he was chained up a night or so the noo chum tells a tale to the Warden, an' pays his fine. So they left here this mornin'.'

' Did you tell the new man our experience ?'

' My oath ! An' so did your mate, the—the spitologist bloke.'

' Don't say that ; Hoskins will hear you.'

' I don't mean no harm to the poor feller—the sick bloke, I mean.' Then, to take any remaining sting from his first words, he added hastily : ' He may be a spitologist, but he ain't no fiblicator. I'd trust that mate o' yours with anything if I had it.'

' If you had it, Jim !'

Johnson grinned, wiped his sudoriferous face, grinned again, and said slowly, appreciating his own humour : ' It's bad luck for your mate that all I got's in the old woman's name since that affair o' Brasch's.'

Gifford sought Hoskins, and found him, though improved, strangely restless.

' For Gord's sake, Giff,' said he, ' let's get out o' sight o' houses. I can't get me breath inside four walls, nor near a fence neither.'

' All right, old pal. What track this time ? I must go somewhere on the chance of finding something. I'll be on the rocks in a year or so if I don't make a punch at something.'

' Well, there's a chap turned up here yesterday, an' he says he saw good country about a 'undred mile nor'-west. I know the track to Sandy Creek, and it's fifty mile a bit west o' north o' that.'

' Is the man here ?'

' Yes ; let's go and find 'im.'

They found him easily in the first place of search, which was the natural one—the bar—and the man gave his information, which seemed reliable, because it did not attempt particularizations.

‘It’s good country,’ said he; ‘that’s all I know. Quartz and iron and that like. Don’t know whether there’s gold or not in ’em.’

‘Didn’t you stop to try?’

‘No; ye see, it ain’t my game. My game’s drovin’. I drove some starvers to the Gulf, and after that, damn my shirt if there was anything left to drove! ’Ave a drink, mister.’

It was not a request, but a command.

‘Thanks.’

‘Here’s a thousan’ a year! Drought was bad enough, but the track’s hell now. I lost me hat and veil seventy miles back, and since then the flies et me. Something cruel it was. Have another, mister?’

‘No; have one with me.’

‘All right. I’m that thirsty I’d drink with Nosey Bob the hangman. It doesn’t matter a dump who pays. Here’s luck!’

‘And it’s fifty miles nor’-west of Sandy Creek?’

‘A bit west o’ north; can’t miss it. ’Ave another?’

‘It’s up to me now, mates,’ said Jim Johnson. ‘I’m no dry hash.’

Gifford and Hoskins drank again and escaped, leaving the drover to the distraction he had so well earned. Before they left next morning Hoskins bought a clothes-line, and with an air of being ashamed of his soft-heartedness, returned from John’s stable-yard leading by the clothes-line a lolling and humorous cattle pup, his hide a fantastic streaking of white and orange,

with an extra freak of pigmentation in the form of an orange spot that covered one ear and half of one eye. The Prodigal dragged the unwilling pup to where Gifford stood tightening The Flash's girths, and the pup put his head inquisitively askew and looked the incarnation of sly humour.

'What are you going to do with him, Ned?'

'Well, yer see, you was away near two days, and the pup cottoned to me, so I'll take him along.'

'But why drag him? If he's cottoned to you, he'll follow.'

'No, he won't. He ain't cottoned enough yet, and he's that soft-hearted that he follers the man who gives him the last kind word.'

'Just like me when I was young, Ned.'

'Jus' like me all me blessed life, Giff.'

The two pack-horses of the procession were driven ahead, and the mates followed, the cattle pup at first objecting, and fighting his tether in a ridiculous way; but, having been half choked, he made the best of his abduction, and trotted in the horses' tracks, his tongue lolling, his eyes looking in many directions at once, and energy and humour in every hair of him.

Near a creek they rode under a big gum, and a jealous magpie darted from the nest and fled at Gifford's head, afraid of no consequences, ready to avenge the insult of the stranger who had come too close to the castle. With whips they beat it off, and by speed distanced it, and Gifford said he had half a mind to return and shoot it.

Said Hoskins: 'Why would yer do a mean trick like that? S'posin' you had a little kid o' your own, and a giant two 'undred feet high come too near, an' you

thought he meant fight, an' you went out an' knocked hell out o' him, and druv him off, an' nex' day he comes along with a cannon and blows you inter smithereens—eh ?'

'You're getting very soft-hearted, Ned. You didn't always talk like that.'

'True, Bill, that is. Seems t' me the stronger a man is, the crueller he is—eh? I s'pose I'm changin' because my contract's about finished.'

He was depressed for a moment, but the next he, looking wearily at the cattle pup, saw some joke of the animal's, and laughed until a fit of coughing stopped him. His transitions from gloom to joy were as sudden as they were short-lived; at night he was depressed to the dust, but while the sun shone he rioted in the skies.

Gifford watched him with a new fear born of the new friendship, and was afraid and glad by turns. They rode slowly for Hoskins' sake, riding but twenty miles a day, although the man's great heart would have carried his worn-out body double the distance. On the fourth day the cattle pup was released from the ignominy of the clothes-line, and romped along with them, doing twenty miles nor'-west and forty miles off the track to all points of the compass, pursuing mice, and bringing old and seasoned 'goannas' to bay. They showed such threatening front that he fled from the position without dignity or profit, running blindly under the horses' hoofs, and being trodden on, so that he yelped his great anguish, immediately forgot the accident, and was trodden on again ten minutes later.

They reached the limit of the rat plague, and found upon a patch of rocks the bodies and skeletons of

millions of rats and grasshoppers ; and Gifford, always anxious to amuse his invalid, mentioned the fact.

‘Curious thing that, Ned. You remember our camp last trip was much west of this?’

‘Yes, about a ‘undred and fifty miles.’

‘And the rats came from the east, didn’t they? because they passed the camp when we were there two days.’

‘That’s so. Well?’

‘Well, they’re on the way back, and they’ve died by the ton weight.’

‘And the grasshoppers, too, Giff.’

‘And do you notice the flies are not so bad, Ned?’

‘I do that. I was jus’ goin’ to say the same to you.’

For an hour they rode over the bones of this retreat from Moscow—Nature’s successful attempt to kill the surplus life she had made in the drunkenness of the new rains, excusing her past barrenness with her present excess, and then murdering the excess ruthlessly.

CHAPTER XLII

THEY reached the place that the drover had told them of, and found quartz and iron, but no gold, and unwilling to give up the search, went north, and found a great lake of lotus by a creek ; and Hoskins being worn out, and in a depression more than usually prolonged, they camped there to recuperate him.

In this inaction Gifford found his hell, blaming himself in almost all his waking minutes for his facile acceptance of Stralie's decision, cursing the mingled pride and despair that had prompted him to make the journey with Phelan, so leaving the way clear for Abbey.

'I was a fool!' was the constant burden of his thoughts ; 'and Jack was right. I knew she loved me. I know she does now. I should have taken her in my arms and never given her time to be proud.'

Their camp was made by one of the horns of the half-mooned lagoon, half covered with the great magnolia-green leaves of the lotus. A leaf curled by a fish or a bird showed the brown leathery lining below it. A broken lotus root, some fathoms long, trailed like a drowned snake. The great violet lilies, nearly a foot wide, floated on the glassy water, motionless as painted flowers on a mirror. Pandanus grouped themselves on the banks, and flung leaf-shadows to the lagoon. The

sunlight doubled the beauty of everything ; the long sedges were motionless. Near the tree that shaded Hoskins a coloured lizard fascinated a butterfly by pretending to be a flower, and the inquisitive insect fluttered above him on mealy wings. Over a great lotus bloom quivered a splendid dragon-fly, his wings of silken mesh so ethereal that he seemed to be himself a flower suspended.

Hoskins lay there, and Gifford, having completed the arrangements of the camp, sat by him and smoked. The horses cropped the grass, and looked up now and then at the men who were both destiny and burden to them. The irresponsible cattle pup wandered into the water and out again, and jumped at leaping fish, and half drowned himself, and was caught by the constricting lotus roots. He barked and disturbed water-fowl, and generally acted like the joyous fool he was, and escaped consequence only by reason of his youth.

‘My word, this is great!’ said Hoskins. ‘Makes me forget I’m done.’

‘I shouldn’t have let you come a trip like this, Ned.’

‘Now, who could uv stopped me? Why, I couldn’t live in a town lately, an’ I’ll take me davy I couldn’t die in one, neither.’

‘You die? You’re all right, Ned.’

‘I know! I know! Lissen to them pigeons—Curukity-coo! curukity-coo! curukity-coo! That’s why I called them copper shows “Coocooroo,” y’ know. But I told yer that many a time before. Beg yer pardon.’

‘It’s all right, Ned. Tell it to me fifty times if you like.’

'Now, all that there wants is a crane, a —— big white crane, t' come down that little beach—y' see where the reeds are—'n put 'is toes in the lagoon 's if he was frightened o' water. I like t' see a crane do that. 'E knows yer lookin' at 'im, an' he says, "Ho!" he says, "just you wait till I make that cove believe I don't take baths reg'lar." I seen one do that in Sydney Botanical once; I watched him more 'n 'arf 'n hour.'

'Good old Ned! Always fond of little things, weren't you, Ned?'

'My oath! Always fond o' anything that wasn't unkind to me. . . . I'm fond o' you, Giff. You're a man: I like yer.'

'Poor old Ned!'

'Call me poor, but for Gord's sake, don't call me old!' As he spoke a white heron entered to his cue—tardily, but not enough to hurt, for the little play had gone on without him.

'All right, old man. Why, look there! There's your crane.'

'So he is—a beauty, too. But he ain't a crane: 'e's a 'eron. Good luck to him. . . . Come back, yer damned Orangeman's dorg! Ah-h-h-h! yer cow! Leave the bird alone.'

The dog slunk behind a tree and was cast down for almost two seconds. The heron came to the water, dipped his toes in very daintily, curled up one leg, and became lost in profound thought.

Hoskins laughed.

'Didn't I tell yer? He goes 'arf an inch inter the water, and then thinks about his deposits in the Worm Bank. . . . Ain't it all pretty?'

'Yes, old man.'

The depression swooped like a kite on the sick man.

'An' I've got to leave it all, dead-sure. Why in 'ell can't I do it now, an' get it over?'

'You're all right, Ned—you're getting well.'

'No fear, mate. . . . But it's too long. Death's as slow as the wrath o' Gord.'

The cattle pup had been watching his face, and now he felt he was forgiven, and crawled to Hoskins, and grovelled until the sick man's hand petted him into self-respect. And at the feel of the dog under his hand Hoskins became half merry.

'When this pup was goin' to chase that 'eron, d'ye know I was lookin' round for a stone to throw at 'im; an' it reminds me of a chap I knoo in Riverina. There's big plains there, y' know, an' one day a chap bets a cove from Bendigo he couldn't throw a stone over the road. So the cove gets wild and takes it on, an' they 'ave a bet o' drinks for the crowd on it. Well, we all goes out, an' the Bendigo cove looks round for a stone to throw, an' o' course he couldn't find one, because there wasn't a stone for twenty mile. My oath! the Bendigo cove was mad when he had to pay for the drinks. . . . But that's an old one. I told yer that before. Beg yer pardon.'

'It's all right, Ned. It's a very good yarn, and I was glad to hear it again.'

'Did ye ever hear o' the chap that couldn't find a blade o' grass to clear a pipe with?'

'No,' said Gifford, who had heard the story many times.

'Well, a chap come to Emu Rock in the middle o' the drought, and strikes a camp where Hickey the Blower was. Great skiter, Hickey, but very cunnin'.

'E'd got his pipe stuffed, and there wasn't a needle or a bit o' wire anywhere. "Nev' mind," says Hickey, "I'll 'ave t' smoke it out." "Don't do that," says the other cove, "I'll go an' get a stor." "Bet yer can't!" says Hickey the Blower. Other cove bets 'im three 'arf-crowns. So out 'e goes an' picked up every bit o' dirt on two acres, an' didn't find a stor or a twig or nothing strong enough to clean the pipe. That was a good 'un, wasn't it?

'Yes, Ned, old chap—very good.'

'I believe y' did 'ear it before. . . . Oh, my Gord! I'm full up. If I can't get good again, I want t' get under quick!'

'Don't talk like this, Ned—don't think of it. Cheer up! You'll pull through, and we'll go out on a new track and find something big.'

'All my tracks are close up to a perish, Giff—close up.' He shook his head and suddenly brightened. 'But I've had a time—oh, what a time! I'm forty-seven, an' I've lived a 'undred an' forty. Findin' things, and gettin' tired o' things quick, an' goin' somewhere else.' Ole Rye at Lake Superior, an' Guardienty in Colombia, an' Squareface at Tibooburra, an' Brandy at Rum Jungle. . . . An' always somethin' noo, y' know. Eh! a shine life. Not much women—never had much time for 'em; but when I did, my oath! they didn't forget me quick. . . . There's a kid o' mine somewhere in Canada—grown man 'e is now, if 'e ain't dead. He'd be a fine-lookin' chap, too. The girl that was his mother—she had hair like—like—well, as thick as them reeds. An' I was a smart young chap, too.'

'I'll bet you were, Ned.'

'You'd win yer money, mate. The girls used t' say

so, anyway. I could lift two men in a chair with one 'and once. I did it, too. Look at me 'and now.' He held up a brown semi-transparency, with only solidity in the configuration of the bones. 'What do all the girls, an' the noo sights, an' the fightin' matter now? Nixey, me bo'. When I'm dead, everybody's dead, an' the pig, too.'

'You die! You'll drink many a distillery dry yet, old chap. . . . Not another word. Laugh! Sing! I'll get the tea.'

The sunset turned the sky to blood and gold—the colours of the life of man. The night came upon them as Gifford ate and Hoskins drank a pannikin of canned broth. Gifford made up the fire for the night, and fixed his mate's mosquito-net. The silence of the Bush is peace unto the soul in the day, when the sunlight is on the vast distances; but at night, when the expanses of the continent seem to be closing in upon the one camp-fire, it is too deep for comfort. It pressed heavily on Hoskins, who had the fear of extinction in him, and on Gifford, already burdened with anxiety for his mate. In that awful stillness the dog crouched on Hoskins' blanket and whimpered, and the hobbled horses came closer to the men, and the men met them with half-suppliant and half-caressing hands.

Hoskins coughed a great deal that night, and fear gripped Gifford, and he forgot Stralie and all his personal troubles.

'I'm the devil's bit, if there is a devil,' said Hoskins; 'but if there's a Gord, He ought to know what a man is. But it's fifty to one there ain't nothin'. Anyhow, a man gets to think there ain't after he's been in the back country a long time, and only himself to depend on.'

Gifford did not reply, because he had nothing to say.

'On'y one thing I'm real sorry for—me poor old mother. Did I ever tell yer about her?'

'No, mate—no, Ned.'

'She was all right till the old man died. A good man he was—useter dress us up Sundays an' take us for a walk, an' we'd wake up that clean on Mondays, you know, 'avin' Sunday's clean clothes on, an' feelin' all new.'

'Yes, Ned.'

'Well, 'e died—killed off a buildin', and o' course she changed. O' course a kid couldn't know that strugglin', an' bein' father and mother too, 'ud make her sour and snarlin', always with 'er 'and ready t' 'it yer, an' sayin', "Go to bed, y' little devil!" Before 'e died, y' know, she'd kiss me, an' wash me face, an' say "Gentle Jesus," an' tuck me in; but o' course a kid couldn't know, an' me little brother was on'y a year old when me father hopped the twig. See!'

'Don't talk, Ned; your throat's too bad.'

'I'll get it off me chest while I feel like it, Giff. Well, one night she gimme a clout on the ear. I goes to bed an' I lays there bustin' with rage, an' she goes on pattin' the baby to sleep, singin' nothin' at all—you know, like mothers. My mother useter sing "There, there, there, there," an' nothin' else, an' pat the baby, an' the baby'd buzz like a pussy-cat on a hob, an' go to sleep. An' this night the kid wouldn't go ter sleep for all her pattin' an' singin' "There, there!" an' at last she says, "Oh, baby! baby! I'm so tired!" an' bursts into tears; an' the baby seems to understand, an' stops 'owlin' an' coos; an' she says, "There, there," a bit

more, an' the kid goes t' sleep. So I lies there while she's undressin', and at last I says, "Mother, I'll be good, an' I luv yer;" an' she comes across in her ni'gown and takes me in her arms an' cries again. An' she says, "Oh, Ned, your poor father's gone, an' I'm all alone." And I says, "I'll soon be a man, an' I'll work for yer." So we loved each other that night.'

A fit of coughing interrupted him, but immediately it was over he began again.

'Nex' day damme if she don't clout me again, good an' strong, an' I raged like a tiger, an' cleared.'

'But you went back again?'

'In a week, but her an' the baby was gone, left no trace. I looked all I knoo, an' bein' a kid I soon forgot 'em. Why, I was in America when I was twelve, an' in Australia when I was sixteen. A good job I didn't grow up in London: I'd a been a little man of about the size o' that there dorg. Then I went away again an' learned a bit o' minin' in America, an' back I come to Australia when I was twenty-three.'

'And never a word from the mother?'

'Never. About fifteen year ago, you know, when a man gets to be a man an' begins t' think, I tried to find 'em. I was sittin' behind a pile o' greed I made at the Towers, an' Gympie an' I goes back to England an' advertises, but never an answer. She must 'a been dead, an' Gord knows what the crool place did to her before she died. Terrible place, England. When I couldn't find her or me brother I 'ad to clear. I seen too many white-faced people, like two lepers I seen at Bundaberg, only with chilblains, too. Terrible place. Y' ought t' see Poplar, an' Lisson Grove. Me poor mother! I was a dorg.'

‘It wasn’t your fault, Ned; you were only a kid.’

‘Jus’ you think o’ me stinkin’ pride keepin’ me away a week! If I’d gone ’ome in two days I might ’a found ’em. She might ’a gone to the p’leece; but I didn’t know anybody was paid to find anybody till years after. I was a dorg.’

‘Don’t fret, Ned—don’t fret! It can’t be helped.’

‘I know it can’t be ’elped—it’s the on’y thing that sticks in me gizzard. If I’d only been decent t’ me old mother, I’d blow me light out now dead easy. For I’ve had a time! My Gord! what a time!’

He lay there exhausted, and Gifford said: ‘Have a whisky, old man?’

‘I will that—a big un! Fill the pannikin, an’ then I’ll go to sleep. . . . That’s enough. I’ll take the water after. Here’s luck, mate! an’ Gord bless yer, an’ give yer whatever it is yer want! For a good mate ye’ve been—a white man all through.’

They drank, and lay back in their blankets, and the night and their memories sank upon them.

At dawn the dog began to whimper, and Gifford, so anxious that he had not really slept, sprang up and went to his mate’s side.

‘I’m all right, mate,’ whispered Hoskins. ‘Jus’ you put the ’ead ’igher.’

Gifford did so, lifting him as tenderly and as surely as a cat carries her kitten in her mouth, and Hoskins said he felt better. Yet as the mist rose from the lagoon the breath seemed to rise out of the sick man as life leaves a griped horse.

He lay there motionless for an hour, and glade and lagoon were flooded with light when next he spoke. Looking at Gifford, who returned the gaze with anxious

eyes, feeling all a vagrant dog's gratitude to this man who had given him love and responsibility.

'Don't bother . . . Giff—I'm good and—strong again.'

The pink hæmorrhage of phthisis welled through his lips and matted his beard. Gifford wiped it away, and the brave optimistic eyes looked out, full of youth and hope for a moment, on the beauty of tree, air, grass, and water.

'I'm—right—Giff. I'll be . . . as fit . . . as a fiddle—to-morrer.'

The blood gushed again, and the life was torn from him as a gardener tears up a weed.

The dog stood up, wagged his tail, crouched his fore-quarters till his head was on his paws, barked, and invited all the world to come and play.

CHAPTER XLIII

‘Let us eat, drink, and be merry ; *or* to-morrow we die.’

DELIA MILLS heard of Stralie’s engagement a week before chance took her to Coocooroo, and when they met it was at a church bazaar, one of the hurried dissipations of the town, that, like a strong man slowly dying of an incurable disease, felt its time was short, and forced its pleasures wildly in the attempt to live indeed ere annihilation came.

Delia hurried conclusions, as was her habit.

‘You know you care for Mr. Gifford, Miss Field.’

Stralie looked as if she would like to run away, but she knew that Delia would follow her, and therefore tried to protect herself with evasions.

‘I can’t talk about it at all, Delia.’

‘Yes, you can. You don’t love Mr. Abbey, and you’re the only woman Mr. Gifford cares for. It’s cruel to make him miserable over nothing—I wouldn’t.’

‘You!’ said Stralie half contemptuously, because the truth annoyed her, and she wanted to sneer.

‘Me! I wouldn’t care what he’d done—I’d forgive him if forty women had been divorced through him.’

‘No woman was divorced through him. He’s not a bad man.’

‘I know; but I wouldn’t have cared if he had been.’

'You wouldn't? How dare you? You're in love with him yourself.'

'I know I am. What do I care who knows it? And I'm better than you are, for I'd forgive him anything.'

She turned to leave, but Stralie melted suddenly, and cried: 'Oh! I know you are better than I am. I think I was too hard; but I can't go back now.'

'Why can't you? Would you rather be unhappy all your life than give up a minute's pride? What does a woman want with pride once she's in love with a man?'

'Oh yes, she does!'

'No, she doesn't! Once she's in love with a man she's got to say he's master.'

'Delia, I can't! I can't! And Mr. Abbey has been so kind. But you are a good girl, Delia, and I am grateful to you for trying to put us right. Will you shake hands?'

'I will,' said Delia heartily. 'I'll kiss you, if you'll let me.'

In that moment the two felt like blood-sisters, and kissed like new friends.

CHAPTER XLIV

GIFFORD buried his mate in the place of his death, with the rollicking pup and the meditative heron as principal witnesses, and then he struck camp and drove the three horses before him. He rode to Girofla within two days, the tireless energy of The Flash outwearing the sober geldings.

And then he went to Coocooroo, and found the town doomed to removal; for capital had been exhausted and the mines condemned, and the smelters were to be run down within a few weeks.

He met Hempel, still as busy with the stoppage of operations as he had been in their initiation. This man, who revelled in work, had no time to be sorry for anything. He met Abbey, and Abbey was constrained and Gifford cold, so that they parted with mutual relief. The hotels were doing a roaring trade; while the women prepared for their voluntary eviction, the greater energy of the men drove them to seek nepenthe in the forced merriment of a wild spree.

Gifford left Coocooroo with no definite intention, and rode the raving stallion out to Eclipse Corner, finding there none but the black King of the fireproof-safe insignia, and two lubras, who didn't count, and Delia Mills, who did.

She was singing over the ironing-board, ironing the

flounces of a muslin dress; and when he entered her face was flushed by happiness to beauty, as if he had been the rising of the sun after a long night.

'Oh, Mr. Gifford,' she cried, putting the iron on the ironing-cloth, whence arose a smell of burning flax, and a brown stain spread like spilled treacle.

They shook hands, and then she saw the damage, rushed to the iron, let fall the iron-pad, took the handle in her naked hand, dropped it, and put her fingers in her mouth.

'Poor girl! What can I do?'

She exaggerated the injury, glad of the offer of the ministrations of the beloved.

'Salad oil and flour—that's the best. O-o-o-h!'

'Good! Where's the oil? You sit down! Yes, you shall! Here's a chair. Where's the flour?'

'In that biscuit-tin. Thank you, Mr. Gifford. O-o-h!'

She looked at him from the corners of her eyes, grimaced her pain, and then exaggerated it of malice aforethought.

'Oh! oh! oh!'

'Poor little girl! Wait a minute. Here we are. Look! I've let the oil spill on the clean floor.'

'Never mind the floor. Oh!' She looked at him while he dusted the flour on the burn. Her gaze plainly said, 'Burn me again if you like, but stay.'

'Now, where's a rag?'

'Take one of those handkerchiefs, please.' She finished the sentence with 'dear,' in brackets and under her breath.

'Wait a moment. I'll tie the knot on the back of the hand. Is that comfortable?'

'Yes, thank you.' ('You lovely man!')

‘ And you won’t be able to finish the dress ?’

‘ Oh, it’s really done. There was only a bit of the bottom flounce, and that ’ll do as it is.’

‘ What’s the finery for especially ?’

‘ Don’t you know that there is a ball at Coocooroo to-morrow night, and a dance, too ?’

‘ What’s the difference ?’

‘ Oh, the ball is at the Divisional Hall for the big people (they’ve brought a string band and a caterer up from the coast), and the dance is at the Mechanic’s, for—for us, you know—all the clerks and the store young men. I’m going to the dance.’

‘ But you don’t ride over there in that ?’

‘ Oh no. I carry that in a parcel, you know. I ride over in the afternoon. I don’t take a habit—just an ordinary walking skirt, and turn the skirt back to front while I’m riding.’

In her desire for familiarity, she seemed to take a childish pleasure in telling these intimate trivialities.

‘ And when do you come back ?’

‘ Oh, after the dance. I’ll have to be away nearly a day, and I’ll be lazy next day, so I’ve done everything for two days ahead : I made bread enough, and fixed up everything.’

When he thought of his own extravagances, and compared her joyful payment for a little finery and innocent amusement with hard labour, he was filled with shame, although he knew that the shame was baseless, the difference in their conditions making a common judgment impossible. But it is a selfish man that does not worship beautiful youth, with its strong, cheerful, unformulated philosophy, its native unselfishness and unconscious courage ; and Gifford worshipped

it the more because the losses of his anchor-love and of his guiding friendship now made him seem unto himself very, very old.

When she spoke again, it was with some constraint, and after an embarrassed silence. 'Mr. Gifford, you don't mind me saying something about Miss Field?'

'No, Miss Mills.'

'It's because I'm fond of you.'

'Eh?'

She corrected herself quickly. 'Fond of you both.' And, in parentheses, 'Oh, you beautiful man! how could she think *you'd* be untrue to her?'

'Everybody is fond of her, Delia.'

At the sound of her own name she vibrated like an overstrained violin string, but did not reply except in an aside: 'She! She's not good enough to tie your bootlaces!'

'What were you going to say of her, Miss Mills?'

'Well, she's engaged to Mr. Abbey. She doesn't love him.'

He laughed bitterly. 'She'll marry him, though.'

'More fool she, then. But she doesn't love him.'

'Of what use is that to me, Delia?'

She thrilled again, but with less hope. The abandonment in his voice showed how incurable was his passion.

'It's less good to her, Mr. Gifford. She loves *you*.'

'Why does she send me away, then? Why does she engage herself to Abbey?'

'Oh, women are a helpless lot. They must have somebody, and if they can't get the one they love they take the one who loves them.'

She spoke sadly, as with prescience of her own fate.

'But what keeps her from the man she loves, then?'

'Her pride—just her silly pride. They laugh at me for crying over novels, but I'm not silly, anyway. If I loved a man, and he did anything to hurt me, I'd be sorry, but I wouldn't hurt myself more by sending him away.' Her voice shook a little, but she steadied it, and continued: 'And it's always the best men who make fools of themselves. A weak man can't do wrong because he's afraid. But I wouldn't marry a weak man. I'd have the strong man, with all his faults.'

'And you think it's only pride, Delia?'

'I'm sure. First pride, and, since her engagement, a little gratitude to Mr. Abbey, and an awful fear of being talked about.'

'Well, no modest girl likes to be talked about, Delia.'

'Oh, why do you make excuses for her? I suppose she can't do any wrong at all?'

'She can't, Delia.'

'Oh, that isn't possible.' But to herself she said: 'You lovely man!'

'I've lost her absolutely, Delia.'

'You haven't. If I were you I'd go to her and take her by storm, and never give her a chance to bully you.'

'That was Daven's advice long ago.'

'It's a pity you didn't take it. Mr. Daven must have known women. And why didn't you take his advice? You don't look like a man who'd say "Please, dear," and "Do, dear," and "Forgive me, dear," and crawl to a woman. Mr. Abbey does; you don't.'

'Delia, I never was that kind of man. I got her by storm in the first place, but when the exposure happened my conscience told me I was wrong and that Stralie

was right, and I couldn't take her again by storm after I had lost her.'

'You never lost her. And your conscience! People don't love with their consciences; they love with their hearts.'

'Delia, you're a good friend.'

He seized her hand, and she leaned to him as a tree from the wind, so vibrant and overfilled with sensation that she felt as if she were dying, and hoped she were.

'I'll think over the advice, and if I think it's good I'll go to her for the last time.'

He dropped her hand, and she shivered and came back to consciousness again, as Mrs. Dunphy with her beloved and overfed heir entered the kitchen.

Next morning Gifford left early, and Delia, having prepared his breakfast, hid in her room while he looked for her to say good-bye. Finally he made his farewells by proxy of Mrs. Dunphy, and rode off puzzled and disappointed. And Delia watched his every movement from her little window until a belt of trees at a bend of the track hid him from her sight. She did her work that day with more than her usual energy, but not once did she sing.

Gifford stopped at Tom Locky's camp all day, and heard a wonderful account of the collapse of the English company, that, unable to come to decision while it had funds, and having spent all its sixty thousand pounds in sinking shafts in limestone, had now been brought to a decision by the exhaustion of its capital.

Gifford listened to the story as a weary man hears the sound of distant water, his mind revolving the advice of Delia Mills.

Locky rode to Coocooroo for the dance early in the afternoon, and Gifford stayed at the accountant's camp. Finally, without decision, irresistible inclination pushed him on the road to Coocooroo. He bade the accountant good-bye, and rode away on the half-darkened road, restraining The Flash to a walk by a curb, so tightened that it crushed the stallion's lower jaw.

He would no longer be the play of her suicidal pride. She must be changeable as a woman should be, full of a woman's mobile wants and senses; she must be done with this unmaidenly inflexibility—more like the persistence of a man in revenge on an enemy than the resentment of a girl chastising a recreant lover.

She should be given this one chance of making happy the lives of both of them. In any event he would see her again, hold her in his arms whether she would or no, and crush anything that came between them—friend, foe, man, god, woman, or devil. His soul was filled up with fierceness; then he grew suddenly calm, being decided, and loosed the curb. The Flash reefed and galloped.

CHAPTER XLV

'Thou camest, thine hair flashing with gold as I let fall the crocus petals, gleaming gold back again into my robe at my bosom.'

'All thy garments smell of myrrh, aloes, and cassia ; out of the ivory palaces, whereby thou hast made me glad.'

COOCOOROO sang its swan-song loudly. The dance at the Institute was very mixed: miners and stockmen, and barmaids and selectors' daughters, and the Copper-tails of the township. Jim Johnson talked loudly of the old days, to the discomfiture of the two discordant accordions and the independable banjo.

At the ball in the Divisional Hall the warden and the lawyers, the mining agents, and other Silvertails danced and chatted, and accepted the inevitable closing down of the mines and the township very philosophically, being always prepared for such things.

Tom Locky, ranking as a mine manager, ranked also as a Silvertail; Charley Byers, being merely a clerk, danced at the Mechanics' Institute with the Coppertails; and Annie Johns accepted love, the leveller of rank, as sufficient reason for abandoning social preferment, and danced with Charley Byers aforesaid, her feet as light as her heart that night.

The air, moist and generant still from the break-up of the drought, was made crepuscular by millions of

stars, and called the seed in every garden. Under the ponciana-trees a girl, weary for the moment of dancing, swung in a hammock, listening to the sobbing flats of an erotic waltz. The air was full of frangipani scent ; in the lamp-light tecoma and poinsettia flamed rivalry.

The Silvertails accepted their pleasure quietly, half-sadly. Over in the Mechanics' Institute Jim Johnson danced marvellous jigs of his own invention whenever the floor was vacant. The dancers called each other out to sing, applauding everybody very violently. Annie Johns, for instance, had to sing twice over a melancholy and bathetic song, which these humorless people enjoyed as the humorous enjoy humour :

‘ There on the bed
Baby lies dead,
While the dance goes on.’

They roared the chorus bull fashion in a manner that threatened to awake any baby who had not been dead too long ; they danced after it, and applauded Jim Johnson's jig again. Annie was pressed to sing the bathetic song yet again, and while she sang all the engaged girls sat with their hands sadly self-clasped in their laps and looking very self-conscious, as if courtship were over and marriage and maternity come ; and in all simplicity mentally shedding quiet tears while the men roared of the baby who lay dead on the bed while the dance went on.

At ten o'clock came Abbey to the Divisional Hall, and with him Australia Field. A mirificent vision of beauty she was that night, moving with the carriage of a happy queen. She overpowered Abbey so that his arm trembled under her hand. Her dress was that

ivory silk whose hue Annie Johns had said was made for her, a little deeper in tone than her skin. Had the dress been slightly yellower, she might have been called quite truly 'the crocus woman,' as the newest assayer, only six months out from England, called her with a fervour that made the worshipping Abbey to frown.

She had not one ornament of price, but there was a frangipani cluster in her hair and another in her corsage, masking the break of her breasts.

A little crowd surrounded her, and Abbey wandered disconsolately on its outer edge; but after a few minutes' chatter she saw him there, and his handsome face that had been clouded changed to sunshine again as she smiled upon him, while he trembled anew to her touch. They moved off to the music of the waltz, she unheeding even the clasp of his arms.

The motion quickened her blood only a little, but not to intoxication, for he was not quite the right man; his veins were stirred as if by bells and trumpets, for she was the right woman. Then the sensuousness of the lights, the music, the night calling to the poor old drought-scarred earth to be young again, and order its most sapless plant and dust-dry seed to ingeminate itself and rise from slime to starlight; the subtle scent of the frangipani, made her forget all but the waltz, to move in a dream that was but half-perfection, because it had only herself in it.

At midnight Gifford rode into Coocooroo on the great black stallion, the glossy animal with the skin of satin, the pride of an insulted virgin, and the blazing star on his forehead like unto the star of the sacred horse of Solomon. The Flash felt the beauty of the night and the beauty of his own strength, and pannaded from

wheel-rut to bridle-track ; and Gifford, whose thoughts were set to funeral measure, tried to pull him to a walk, and only succeeded in making the pace gestic.

And ahead flamed the Cross, the two pointers apparently close and companionable as lovers, though they are separated by the distance of half a world. Gifford felt the absoluteness of his loneliness as he entered the town at the end where lived the married miners, who knew not dancing, whether with Silvertails or Coppertails, but smacked their children in due season and went to bed early. Here was silence, and yet not silence ; the air pulsated to the breath of all those horizontal hundreds forgetting in sleep the soreness of their eviction that was to come to-morrow. All the voices of the night were hushed on this high ground ; the huts lightless ; a sigh seemed to rise from this unconscious humanity that had to trek, calling to the sky to avenge its lost effort and its unavailing sweat.

On the flat there was a light in Tommy the Dog's shanty, where Tommy the Dog and the Frenchman competed in a waltzing match without an audience, the music being provided by a sleepy youth who played a tin whistle, and had no regard for time, or place, or tune, or anything of rule ; away on the hill near the creek, rushing turbulently through its channel of living marble, the smelters, that were to be blown out to-morrow, flung their ribbons of red and molten slag. Gifford looked at it all for a moment, sighed, and rode on.

In the yard of the Mechanics' Institute the tethered horses of the dancers jostled and squealed ; twenty peaceable geldings being incited thereto by the amorette of a cart-horse, who held his great foolish roman-nosed

head over the fence, and neighed to a randomly-biting mare.

In the Institute itself, Delia Mills, who had ridden the twenty miles from Eclipse Corner that afternoon with her dress turned back to front for a habit, and who would ride the twenty miles home through lime-rock and gum and cotton tree before the dawn, sang to a larrikin vamp of the tortured piano:

‘Yes, it’s down where I was born,
In the yaller, yaller corn.’

And as Gifford idly stopped to listen, the bull-voiced chorus broke out again. The Flash neighed suddenly and reared, so that his rider had to cut deep into his lower lip with the curb-chain before he would consent to become a sober horse again.

When he reached the Divisional Hall the moon had risen, showing the hammock swinging empty under the poncianas to the newborn wind of midnight. The dancers were silent. Gifford heard only the dearest voice in all the world singing something with ‘Good-bye’ in it. A wailing ‘cello seemed to make the heart-break in the voice complete.

While Stralie sang Gifford stayed there, hearing with only an inward ear, for every mood of her voice struck a new memory in him: Jack Daven lost in matrimony; Hoskins choked at the crescent lagoon; Gifford himself, the old clean, impulsive, unwearied Gifford, dead also, replaced by a weary man.

The Flash pawed impatiently, and the light breeze changed, and brought the undescribable mingling of the sulphur fumes from the smelters with the scent of citrodora.

The orchestra broke into a waltz of Gungl's that he knew well; the silence was replaced by the threshing, sandy sound of dancing. He remembered a night on the gum-treed heights above the starlit Yarra, when Stralie had come to him in the light dinner-dress he had objected to, as being unseasonably thin—the night she had utterly softened to him, accumbent in his embrace, and returning his kisses.

He knew that he had lost her, and he loved her all the more. His affections had never been reasonable, or ceased because there was no cause for continuance. He loved her as unaccountably as trees fall in the night.

He broke the skin of The Flash with his rarely-used spur, and the horse became mad and bolted for a dozen yards, fighting for his head all the way. Gifford reined him and turned him, and the big black stallion raved back to the hall-door. And there Gifford saw the wonder Australia was that night, and stopped The Flash in one saccade.

He dismounted and looped the reins to his shoulder, and they mutually advanced, and their hands—his hot as the raving horse, hers cool as the midnight wind—met and held. He drew her half-resistingly out of ear-shot and under the poncianas, The Flash going delicately on two feet, and pretending the fear of the hare at every leaf-ruffle.

Gifford held her hand, and she said in great distress, all her resolutions vanished, leaving her for protection only the shield of a strange new timidity and no sword of pride :

‘ Oh, George !’

‘ You saw me, Stralie ?’

‘Not till the horse turned. . . . George, this is wrong. I must go back.’

She said it in a tone that implied that, though she must, she would not; absence could not have made her heart fonder, but it made her judgment softer. She wondered if his strayings with Mrs. Millenet, even if his treason had been absolute, were sufficient reason for her own partial life-wreck.

And while she thought this and repeated to herself that now she must really return, that any paltering with Gifford were disloyalty to Abbey, Gifford had drawn her on past the poncianas to the obscurity of a shealing wall covered with passion-fruit, passion-bud, and passion-flower—three generations all lusty on the one vine.

And then he took her in his arms, and she resisted faintly—her pride, her modesty, her truthfulness, revolting against this tacit lie, although the lie was Nature’s. Stralie struggled against it with the little strength derived from a long habit of the conventionalities we use to excuse the weakness we have and to condemn the strength we have not, and, as usual, Nature won.

She tried to put him from her, murmuring, ‘Oh, this is madness!’ but he held her fast, if tenderly. His eyes burned down on hers in a gaze clement but clamant, and she half acknowledged to herself that the madness was very wise. He kissed her, reading permission in her eyes; her dark head, anademmed with its flowers of chrome and ivory, sank on his shoulder.

She half sobbed in her passion and her shame: ‘Oh, go away, George—go away! We are both mad.’

The Flash neighed. Stralie found a new strength

and slipped from him, and was cold again, though still shaken.

‘You must go at once, Mr. Gifford.’

He said, as passionlessly as herself, that he supposed he must ; and they shook hands, and were ridiculously polite over it. He climbed slowly into the saddle as if he were an old man, and became young again as he felt between his knees the boundless energy of the great brute beneath him.

‘You’ll kiss me once, Stralie ?’ he asked, bending to that virginal figure framed as with mobile silver by the moonlight.

Her soul went out to him in pity. ‘Yes, George,’ she said very softly, coming close to his stirrup, while he restrained The Flash for an instant with the pinching, agonizing curb.

He stooped and she tiptoed, and they kissed again and again, and she tried to say, ‘Only once,’ and was glad he did not hear her ; and he lifted her by the waist, and The Flash got out of hand.

It seemed as if Gifford would suffocate her. The scent of the frangipani made him drunk, strong, daring as a baresark.

Abbey’s voice sounded from the hall-door : ‘Stralie, Stralie ! Mrs. Hempel’s going home.’

‘Quick !’ said Gifford ; ‘I can’t hold the horse. Put your foot in my stirrup.’ He released the iron as he spoke.

The horse snorted and raved. She felt half afraid that she would be dragged by the brute as his pace increased. A look into Gifford’s eyes had shown them cruel with excitement. She knew he would not loose hold of her, and she was ashamed that Abbey should

find her with Gifford, and greatly afraid that the temper of the one-time friends would break disgracefully under the strain of that suspicious meeting.

She murmured that, after this, he must never speak to her again, lifted the dress of Annie John's admiration, put her foot on Gifford's, and was hoisted into Gifford's arms and drawn across the pommel at the moment that The Flash, triumphantly securing a free rein from the relaxed grasp of the lover, reared once, sprang from the earth on all four feet, and had found his stride in an instant.

Gifford let him go for half a mile, perforce; but once outside the town he steadied him to a regular gallop. The Flash, despite his double burthen and the mile or so of heavy sand, kept both ears cocked as he galloped. Then the hill that hid the furnaces was rounded; the flammivomous smelters blooded the silver night for the last time; the moonlight ebbed and flowed upon the lime-cliffs. Gifford drew Stralie tightly into his embrace, and she went unresistingly, betrayed by the night, by the motion through the illimitable spaces, and by the nearness of her lover.

The reins slackened, and The Flash fought again; a metallic, musical tinkling sounded on one of the flat runs of marble that in places pierced the hard alluvium of the track. The horse felt joyfully that he had lost his curb-chain, increased his gallop, and surged into the main road that ran, level as a dead sea, between the lime-cliffs for a dozen miles—the straight track to Girofla.

Gifford did not feel the increase of speed. The frangipani at Stralie's breast and head fell petal by petal, leaving a track of scent as it descended through

the thick air ; mystery of bud and bloom fell on his breast and shoulder. They kissed again, she murmuring :

‘ Oh, what madness ! What can I say to Frank ? ’

And Gifford replied, intoxicated by the scent of her hair : ‘ You smell sweet, like the Bush. ’

It was a night full of light that seemed to be profluent only to these two ; a night for action and for dreams ; the wind alive with electric fragrance ; the moon overflowing the sky ; the lime-range weathered black and outlined argent ; the earth lying Danaë-naked to the firmament ; a night of clamant serenade and bloody reive ; a night of dalliance and a night of spurs. Stralie had the reverie, as physical as an opium dream ; Gifford the half-sensible intoxication of her presence ; and the white-starred stallion felt the joy of a brave animal in his own speed, and his hoofs drummed on the decomposed lime and alluvium as if it had been asphalt on a bridge of steel.

Her head nuzzled to Gifford’s breast again ; the light wrap she wore about her shoulders streamed behind their speed as a banderol on a high tower in a gale ; the frangipani torn from her corsage exposed her beauty still more to the searching moonlight, and Gifford became quite mad.

He covered her face and bosom with kisses, till at last, wakened from dreaming by fear, she forced herself to the outer limit of his arm, and cried :

‘ Take me back ! How dare you ! Take me back ! ’

He was all humility again, saying : ‘ Forgive me, dear ; I’ll stop him now. ’

He pulled at the bridle, and The Flash shook his head and increased his speed still further. What was

a bit to a horse used to fighting a stallion-bar ? Gifford brought one rein round Stralie's waist, and pulled with both hands and all his weight, and the gigantic stallion set his jaw, took a full neck-length of rein, and thundered on, resurgently thrilling.

'Why don't you stop—oh, why don't you stop!' she cried, and began to weep, knowing that if anything could persuade him tears would.

Gifford pulled again, with less result than before.

'I can't stop him,' he said. 'He's got rid of his curb-chain, and I can't hold him.'

'Then he's bolted ?'

'Ye-e-s. But don't fear, dear—don't fear. It's a good road, and he has no vice. He'll run only till he's tired.'

'But I can't be back to-night. Oh, what *shall* I do ?'

'It will be all right. Put your head down again. All right, sweetheart, and I'll never trouble you again. I'll go out back, down to the islands, over to the territory—anywhere, anything ; but for the love of God don't cry, dear girl—*don't cry !*

The joy of holding her, the intoxication of the night, the great horse pulsating between his knees, took possession of him. Moonlight, scented gale, the beloved, a good track, and the stallion splendid ! Her breath fluttered at his throat ; the hoof-beats drummed musically. Wind ! light ! scent ! racket ! speed ! strength ! ripple and swing !

CHAPTER XLVI

‘From a find to a check, from a check to a view,
From a view to a death in the morning.’

UNDER the poncianas and by the shealing of the passion-vine Abbey called loudly for Stralie, and then cooeed in perplexity. He naturally did not connect the neigh and the hoof-noises of a dancing stallion with Stralie’s disappearance. At last he returned to Mrs. Hempel, and that lady spoke of the disappearance in excited tones that reached the ears of two slag-wheelers, just off shift, who stopped at the door of the Divisional Hall open-mouthed, looking at the bare-shouldered women in a furtive downhill sort of way, as if the very mild ball-dresses were indecent.

One of the slag-wheelers shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, and said :

‘There’s a lady in white just got on a big black horse with a man.’

‘A stallion with a white star?’

‘Yes, mister, that’s dead right. I saw his head plain.’

The Saxon phlegm of Abbey was lost in an energetic madness that might have been native to Gifford.

‘That hound!’ he said to Mrs. Hempel; ‘it must be Gifford. The black horse is The Flash.’

‘Bring her back to-night, or she’ll be scandalized out of the north to-morrow.’

‘I will—I will, or I’ll break my neck!’

He ran to where Charley Byers was replacing the bit in his horse’s mouth, talking affectionately to him the while, calling the animal ‘mate’ and ‘old man.’ The Coppertails’ dance was over, the lights out, most of the dancers departed. Jim Johnson’s voice was heard from far muttering to the night of the glory of the old days; Annie Johns and Delia Mills, already mounted, waited for Charley Byers; and Abbey put a hand on the beautiful head of Charley Byers’ bay, and said:

‘Charley, let me have your horse.’

‘Have my horse? Sorry; can’t do it.’

‘I won’t hurt him; I’ll take him easy; I’ll pay.’

‘He cost me seven quid, with a saddle and bridle thrown in, and you can’t have him for seven hundred pounds.’

‘Man, man, don’t keep me waiting; it’s a matter of life and death.’

‘Death for my horse.’

‘A fiver for him for the night.’

‘Not to my father!’

‘Give it to him, Charl,’ said Annie.

‘Not much; just as soon give him you.’

‘It’s for his girl, Charley.’

‘His girl and my horse. No fear! not for all the rice in China.’

‘Good God! I must have a horse. It’s a matter of life and death for a lady.’

Annie slipped from her saddle.

‘Take mine, Mr. Abbey. I’ll borrow one at the Two Mile.’

‘Off with the saddle, Mr. Abbey,’ said Byers, unbuckling the girth and surcingle of his own saddle.

‘Take my saddle, and I’ll go bareback.’

They made the exchange with feverish hurry.

'Better take your coat off, Mr. Abbey; you can't ride easy with those tails,' advised Annie Johns, while Abbey buckled the girths, split a thumb-nail, and cursed at the delay.

'You'll look funny riding in that boiled shirt,' said Delia Mills, laughing, with a suspicion of an unusual malevolence in it—that beautifully soft and nervous laugh of hers, as of a woman checking her lover in the dark.

As he prepared to mount, Annie Johns became business-like, lifted her left foot, and unstrapped the spur, and gave it to him.

'You'll want it; that horse is a packer. She's as lazy as a pig till you give her the hooks.'

He thanked her and the others in the one breath, took off his coat, mounted, drove the little spur home, and Charley Byers gave him a lithe gum-sucker as he passed.

Annie Johns called to him again :

'She's got no pace. She'll shake your brains up when she gets going.'

The mare was so surprised that she pig-jumped a little; broke into a clumsy gallop, that seemed to shake every hair on Abbey's head in a different direction; tried to run off the track; and, balked in that, galloped with her head at right angles to her body. As they passed the Divisional Hall, where Mrs. Hempel stood as if paralyzed, Abbey threw his coat to her, and at that she recovered to the extent and ability to shriek at him hysterical incoherencies, which he neither heard nor understood.

Through the sand he nursed the clumsy gray—a very

circus horse in appearance—the mane and tail dyed a deep orange by the dust of the long drought, a dye that water would never remove—and a torture in motion. She had no pace ; she could not trot nor gallop, nor walk ; her best pace was half the jog-trot of an old stock-horse spoiled by black boys—half the pig-jumping of a lazy packer suddenly surprised by a stock-whip.

Once out of the heavy sand, Abbey surprised the Orangeman—so called for her colour, and without regard to sex—still more with spur and gum-sucker, flogged her into an agonizing camel-like gallop, and kept her so, anger serving to make him tireless.

He remembered Gifford's casual explanation of his patience and self-effacement.

‘ Good old Frank Abbey ! ’ Gifford had said to Stralie, ‘ always taking the back seat. ’

‘ He thinks I'm a worm, ’ said Abbey to himself, ‘ does he. If I'm a worm, here goes for turning ! ’

He sent the spur home again, and the mare grunted her pangs, and wished she could fall dead.

‘ Get up ! . . . What ! you'll break, will you ? On with you, you ginger-tailed cow ! ’

The moonlight had become less intense. The mare galloped shudderingly, her wind coming in sobs, her sweat blinding her ; but Abbey, usually very kindly to all living things, beat her to the speed, and forced her clumsy pace with the little spur.

Anger seemed to leave him, and be replaced by the excitement of the chase—the desire to kill the game when caught. When these ecstasies held him, he spurred the mare raw ; blood covered his boot-heel and dripped from the rowel.

The mare broke again and again, indifferent to the spur or the whip on her flank, so that to keep her at a fair pace Abbey whipped her on the head, curling the lithe gum-sucker around her nose till she sobbed at every yard.

Then, from very fear that his mount would not last out the long pursuit, he steadied her for half an hour, and as the moon paled toward its setting, he heard the noise of many hoofs before, thought he had caught the impudent Roman and the beloved Sabine, called to the mare joyfully, and spurred her to madness.

All the long habit of ambling through the days with a hundredweight of tin oxide on either side of the pack-saddle were forgotten; the mare wrenched her head low; the black of her nostrils had disappeared in lung-red. She tore down on the place of the hoof-noises, and found a dozen team-horses that had been playing elephantinely and running away from nothing in the moonlight, gazing at her in stupid fear.

They did not look for long: the timidity of cats assailed them; they turned and thundered down the road to Girofla, and the gray pursued them at an incredible speed.

The cart-horses were too stupid to leave the track; they galloped clumsily only a few lengths ahead of the nearly-spent Orangeman, biting each other in their jostling, until at where the hill sweeps down to Girofla and Opera Creek goes away south the exhausted draught horses turned heart-brokenly into the lime-rocks, so spent that destruction was preferable to another yard of galloping.

Abbey swept on to Girofla and dismounted at Johnson's hotel. The mare, with her neck extended, and

breathing sparks, stood for a moment, shivered, and then crashed down upon her side.

The township was in darkness, and Abbey was hopelessly at fault. He cursed the delay, and yet had to bear it patiently—the hardest task of an active man in time of stress. But daylight, which he thought would never come—as if a miracle were to be ordained to balk him—came at last, and he found a fresh horse and picked up the tracks of those two-barred shoes he knew the big stallion wore, and noted that where any shadow had fallen on the track or a water-mark crossed it The Flash had leaped like a kangaroo.

He traced the tracks to a rift in the lime range, past the slaughter-yards, where the early crows were busy; put his horse into a trot, and followed the track easily.

CHAPTER XLVII

‘The fly that bites the tortoise breaks its beak.’

THE FLASH galloped on. As they descended the hill into Girofla, silent, deserted, and dark, Gifford tried to pull him again ; and the stallion, seeing a shadow in the track, sprang like a greyhound over it, and partially unseated his riders ; and so got all the rein for himself again.

Gifford sat his mount with some knowledge now ; the long tension and his anxiety for Stralie made him forget that she was in his arms ; he was so devoted to the danger that he almost forgot to hold her ; and she, now seeing that there was more than the danger of scandal, made up her mind, but almost unconsciously, that as she was to have the blame she would have the price. She sank into the angle of his protecting arm, sighed, gave herself up to the intoxication of his presence, but dully, as if the anxiety and the danger were narcotics.

The Flash almost unseated them for the third time as he suddenly left the main track, bending inward to the cliffs that broke here into a narrow gap. There was the town slaughter-yard ; the arms of the gallows, black and threatening, a night-bird on the cross-bar and another fluttering in the act of alighting.

The horse struck into a little plain of ant-hills—clay agglomerations fifteen feet high, barring the moonlight like monoliths. Beyond the plain they entered a long stretch of spear-grass, and in it the campestral track lay coiled and almost lost.

The nodding spear-grass bent its ten feet of stalk under that irresistible surge, flogged the hands and faces of the unlucky two, and wounded Gifford's head and Stralie's neck and bosom with every biting awn; the horse was pricked to a new madness by every little spear that struck him. Where the infrequent trees were less than twenty feet apart the great yellow spider had spun his tough web, thick and strong, and yellow as skeins of raw silk, from trunk to trunk. They raced between these bush-fire blackened trees as if they were open gates leading to new prairies of spears; and when they raced so they tore the clammy web from the trees and felt its sickening embraces on hands and face, and the nauseating fear-bloated spiders scuttled over them into the grass.

They skirted a long swamp, and near its end the spear-grass and the ant-hills disappeared, and great black outcrops of weathered limestone, grown about by salt-bush, replaced them. Either a spider had stayed by the horse or the spear-grass awns under the saddle maddened him to despair; for he became blind and suicidal, rushing up an outcrop—providentially almost flat—and down again. Another and a greater outcrop was directly in his track, but he seemed not to see it. Gifford tried to wrench him, so that the fall that must come would be in the soft swamp; but the horse bored to his old track, saw the great rock too late, tried to leap it, struck it with his fore-feet, and crashed down on

Gifford ; broke his own leg, and rolled on his rider in his agony. Gifford had at the last moment of consciousness thrown Stralie clear of danger ; she lay in the sedge grasses, wet to the skin by bog and dews. The Flash rolled clear of Gifford, rose with one fore-leg dangling, hopped to the drenched grasses by the swamp, groaned, and fell down with his nostrils close to the bog, sucking up the scent of the water he was too spent to swallow.

In half-unconsciousness Stralie rose and tottered to the limestone, where Gifford lay insensible. She felt his brow—it was very cold—and then his head, but could find no wound.

Suddenly he spoke.

‘ I can’t move, but I don’t feel any pain, dear—I’m numb.’

‘ Oh, George ! You speak so strangely !’

She burst into tears, but recovered self-control quickly.

‘ Stralie, find whether there’s a sharp rock under me or not. I think I felt it when we first fell.’

She felt under him and found a sharp lime-rock, tilted somehow and set on edge, so that the force of the fall had made it as murderous as a poleaxe. And then she knew that the mad lover of an hour ago had come to wreck.

‘ I thought so, dear. Don’t grieve. I’ve been riding for a fall all my life, Stralie. Kiss me, sweetheart.’

She stooped and kissed him, and said very composedly : ‘ Let me make you comfortable.’

And at the wish he smiled.

She tore up the salt-bush and spread it, lifted him from the wrecker rock with a strength that was new to

her, seated herself behind him, and drew his head to her breast, and as she did so the silken ivory was blotted crimson. She uttered a cry of love and pity.

‘Don’t fret, dear. The cut in the head is less than it looks, but the other has fixed me. I’m sent for.’

They lay silent while the moon foundered behind the distant shadowy lime-range, and the night changed to a new beauty of starlight. They heard the fugue of a little runnel in the lime-rock suddenly brought to sound by the giving way of a leafy barrage at the miniature falls, the indescribable movement of great aggregations of infinitely small life in the air, the grasses, and the swamp. It was of many sounds, yet unisonant, even to the batrachian stridor of the marsh.

Gifford lay quietly listening to all the sounds of life at its weakest—the life he had so loved in all its expressions—its highest, or its meanest; and Stralie, feeling by instinct all he thought, kissed him whenever he stirred.

‘Stralie, I’m going to die.’

‘Oh, my dear—my dear! don’t talk so.’

‘I’m going to die, Stralie, and I don’t think I’m sorry.’

‘Now, I know you’re going to be well. . . . And you love life so, George.’

‘Yes, I know I did! I do, for that matter. Life is sweet to all, dear.’

‘Yes, my poor George.’

‘Do you remember what they say of the Volsung, Atli’s thrall!’

‘No, dear; I don’t think I ever knew it.’

‘He loved life, although his life was the meanest slave’s. When they forced him to the wars and

promised him glory or death, he only wept at being stolen from his beautiful life of herding swine.'

'Life *is* sweet, and it was so sweet even last night. I didn't think I'd ever see you again, George; but I was nearly happy.'

'I could never have been "nearly happy" without you, Stralie.'

She broke into weeping.

'I was wrong. I thought too much of pride and called it honour.'

'You were right, dear; you were always right. I was substantially guilty.'

'You weren't—you weren't. And if you had been really guilty I had no right to break both our lives for that. Women are always extreme, and I have lost my chance for a silly ideal.'

'You mustn't talk against your nature, sweetheart.'

'I was wrong, George. Girls expect too much from men. They see very bad men like my father, and think that the good men are just as extreme.'

'You were right, Stralie—just right, always right; and I was always wrong.'

'Oh, George, don't belittle yourself. You were the only man for me, and I knew it; but I was like the other women—I had to guide myself by what some dead women had done before me. Everybody I knew, everything I read, told me that men were gods like you or devils like my father. Nobody ever told me that men were only men—not so constant as women, but better than women might be if they had the man's temptations.'

'Don't, Stralie! Let everything rest now.'

‘I’m a selfish wretch, George. I won’t talk like that again.’

‘Let me kiss you, Stralie.’

She bent to him, and they kissed long and silently, but without passion : passion had left them both, as if that long night-gallop had exhausted their youth.

He laughed suddenly.

‘What is it, George?’

‘To think of all the men I’ve seen go under, and I lie here at last. There were a lot at Nigger Creek one night. It was a cold night ; we all mulled our grog with a red-hot dray-axe. Billy Matthews was there—he’s gone ; Ned the Prodigal was there—he’s gone ; John Sampson—he’s gone ; and they all loved life so much they used to grumble like babies about going to bed and missing a little of it.’

‘Poor fellows! Poor George! Oh, why should death be for the strong?’

Her eyes showed as misty stars to the starlight ; she saw Gifford’s quiet smile through her own tears.

‘Because life is only for the strong. Do you think the weak ever really live? It’s unjust enough to them as it is, poor beggars!’

‘George, you’ll get well. See how strong your voice is?’

‘I’m dying all the time, dear. There’s no chance, Stralie! I knew it when we fell. . . . Don’t fret! If I ever thought of death, I thought of it like this—to die strong! Poor Billy Matthews! he died so weak that he said he’d have been glad to roll off a cliff into the sea, only that he hadn’t the strength to roll. And John Sampson died slowly of cancer—choked by cancer in a hospital; and he wanted to die clean and in the

open, as Ned the Prodigal did. And here it all is—clean starlight and clean dawn. It isn't kangaroo-grass by a river, but it's a salt-bush cushion near a swamp, and that's good.'

'Oh, my George!'

Venus came, beckoning the sun, teasing the dawn as a woman her lover with little flashing glimpses of herself; the Cross blazed brighter to show that it was about to be withdrawn, its further pointer, Beta, Centauri, ten thousand million worlds in size, blazing for a moment like Arcturus, Canopus, and Antares all in one. Gifford began to quote:

'“The god Thor, sitting naked as a child, seven stars in his right hand, and Charles's Wain——” Kiss me, Stralie.'

The marvellous stars moved as if they were in a stage sky—the Cross was jerked below the horizon, and the stars were taken away as if they had been suddenly unhooked by a man in a hurry behind the scenes.

The light came, flushing all the east. A worker bullock rang his bell among the ant-hills, came to the lagoon, and drank; another bell sounded afar off, and the first bullock bellowed, telling his mate in yoke and gyve the way to the water.

The dew stopped falling as suddenly as if a man had turned off the tap that fed it. The half darkness became dissilient; the first beam of sunlight showed to Gifford and Stralie, growing out of the lime-crop that had shattered him, the refflorescent cotton-trees, whose blood the sudden breaking of the drought had startled into two blowths in the one year. Zamias fringed the distant edge of the lagoon with crowns of deep Noah's Ark pine-green; a hibiscus, growing bravely from a rift in the lime, flamed by the stricken man.

Gifford looked at it, and sighed for the first time. 'My blood used to burn like that, Stralie.'

A sorrow more poignant than before smote her for this man, who had been spoiled by his own strength and the luck that attended him, making the god-like bound to the summit of happiness so often, but falling to the abysm at last.

Words were useless. She held his head closer to her naked breast, and shivered a little as the morning wind struck her, though to that time grief and excitement had prevented her feeling cold. Her dress was torn and draggled, its corsage ripped to the waist; and, feeling the light on her, she tried to cover herself, but without disturbing him. Failing other covering, she drew the few pins which had not been lost, and her hair fell about him like a perfumed night.

The sun grew into strength, warming their blood again, and the stricken horse by the lagoon suddenly lifted his head, looked back on their tracks through the spear-grass, and neighed bravely to the mare.

'It's Abbey,' said Gifford calmly. 'I'd like to stand up to meet him.'

'It isn't he, George. How could you know?'

'If I were he, Stralie, it would be I.'

The distant spear-grass parted, and Abbey rode out of it, looking from side to side for the horse that neighed.

'Stand up, Stralie, and direct him.'

'No, George. I'll meet him like this—I'm not a coward.'

Her arms clasped him closer; her face rose proudly.

'Good girl! Let me kiss you for the last time.'

She bent to him; he kissed her on the lips, and as she lifted her head again the old passion flickered in

him, and he kissed the areola of her breast. She drew away quickly with a half-exclamation, and then schooled herself to sit calmly with the broken reiver in her arms, while her orthodox lover galloped to them across country, to the imminent danger of his own neck. He had seen the woman bend over the man, kissing him of her own will—an act that Abbey knew had never been voluntary during their engagement—and the sight maddened him.

They waited his coming quietly. Queachy with rage, he threw himself from the saddle, almost before he had stopped his horse.

‘You dog! You dirty thief of other men’s wives! Eh! you think I’m Abbey the worm, don’t you?’

Stralie stopped him. ‘Frank, George is dying: The Flash rolled on him.’

‘And a good job too. . . . Yes, I know it’s brutal. Am I to be the only man in the world who smiles when he’s hurt?’

‘Frank! It was all unforeseen—and he’s dying.’

‘Not yet,’ said Gifford; ‘I’ll take a long time to die. Will you do me a favour, Frank?’

‘I was going to do you the favour of a revolver shot.’

‘Will you give it to the horse? He’ll never be any good again.’

Abbey drew the revolver and walked to The Flash, whose ears cocked as his executioner approached.

‘Turn my head away, for God’s sake!’ said Gifford; and Stralie hid his face.

CHAPTER XLVIII

‘And carve on my breast a turtle-dove,
To signify that I died of love.’

IN the little hospital at Girofla there was but one patient for a month, and that patient Gifford. It had to come so slowly; his vitality fought it every inch of the way, whether he would or no, so that the first resignation passed, and was succeeded by a fierce impatience to take this new track that offered—to say the last good-byes, and buckle the last strap, and ride outward to find the new.

Then, as he thought of Stralie, he was shaken by a burning desire to live; he begged the surgeon to patch him, to build a new man, to make any experiment on his broken body—he was ready for any risk.

Then that passed, and he knew that, not only was the bitter track ready for his feet, but that the sweets of independent action were for ever gone; another force and not he himself—his own brain and desire—something even more foreign than his vagrom impulses would tell him when to go and how to address himself to sleep.

In the last days Red Mick had come there for treatment—a man pain-twisted, but merry still.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Gifford, speaking from his bed to his one neighbour.

‘ Foolishness—strained me inside.’

‘ How?’

Red Mick blushed. ‘ Oh! Well, there was a flash bloke jumpin’ off a box with a two-hundred-pound bag o’ flour, an’ somebody said I was the strongest man, an’ we had a quid on it that I could jump with a two-hundred-pound bag up from my waggon on to another one, ’bout four feet away. So I did it, but I strained me back.’

Gifford smiled. ‘ Now, just imagine you doing a flash thing like that.’

‘ Well, yer see, it wasn’t flashness. Deelyer was lookin’ on.’

‘ Oh!’

‘ Yes—standin’ on the veranda of Bunnie’s pub.’

‘ And did she take any notice of it?’

The Red Man flushed again. ‘ Yes; she nursed me for two days till I come here.’

‘ Good girl.’

‘ My word! she is. And when I come out I’m goin’ to sling the old game. I’ve got a nice bit, and we’ll go homestead-leasin’.’

‘ Good man. You’ll get on, too.’

‘ I hope so. Wouldn’t like her to be hard up, and get ugly and sun-dried, like some o’ the lizards o’ women y’ see between here an’ the coast.’

Daven came from the South as fast as steam could carry him the two thousand five hundred miles, and brought Gifford’s mother with him, and forgot the wife he had left behind in his sorrow for his friend. In the grief of the knowledge that there was to be no more a David, but only a lonely Jonathan, his wife was as if she had never been. He blamed himself for his friend’s

wreck. 'If I had been here I'd have held him in and saved him,' said he.

And Delia Mills came to the hospital day after day till Red Mick was discharged with a bewildering number of cautions, and saw Gifford, and looked at him as if she wished to know his face so well that she could never forget him; but said little. The day after the Red One's discharge she came alone and asked the nurse to leave them together, and with as little self-consciousness as if she were confessing to herself, told him all and plainly that which she had only hinted at Eclipse Corner. He said, 'Poor Delia!' without any trace of pity for his own ending. Then she lost control of herself for a moment, and kissed him, and left in confusion, saying she would come again to-morrow. But there was to be no to-morrow. Daven came, and knew it with the intuition of affection.

'See you to-morrow, George,' he said at parting.

'I hope so, Jack, but I'm as weak as water to-day. I think it's dead finish.'

Then Daven looked around to see if there were any witnesses—for he had a Red Indian's shame of showing emotion—and seeing none, stooped and kissed his mate for the first time and the last.

Stralie had stayed by him late that evening, repeating that she would never leave him again.

'You must go, dear.'

'I won't! Oh! what a fool I was not to forgive anything! Oh, George! George!'

'You must go, dearest. There! there! Don't fret, sweetheart.'

Then Abbey came in and took Gifford's hand.

'Take her away, Frank. . . . Yes, come to-morrow, both of you—in the afternoon.'

'Won't they come in the morning, Mr. Gifford?' asked the nurse.

'No; I said the afternoon purposely. I'll be dead at sunrise, nurse.'

'You,' said the nurse—'you're worth a dozen dead men yet.'

She might have told him with equal assurance that he was worth a million dead men, who are worth just nothing.

But next dawn—at that moment when the painted finches began their day of flash, colour, and shriek in the cotton-trees, and the hawks sprang to the blue and hung there with wings half-furled and eyes greedy of prey—the night-nurse and Gifford's mother saw the change on the face of the waking man. The nurse called the wardsman.

'Bring the screen, Dobson.'

Gifford woke, and smiled at them. Then he saw the screen of death opening its leaves, and his lip trembled and his eyelids quivered. He loved it all, even yet. The wardsman stopped, irresolute.

The time for the last track had come. He knew it; while he died in his heart, his brain was good for a minute after that.

'Open the screen, Dobson,' said the night-nurse; 'Mr. Gifford won't hear you.'

But Gifford did hear. He tried to open his eyes again, and could only flutter them. Fate had buckled the last strap. He revolted for an instant, and then obeyed for the first time, going down the new track to fight his giant in the dark, to the true hell, which is the grave—the hidden place, the trench filled by forgetfulness with the forgotten.

CHAPTER XLIX

‘Surely love is cruel. He sucked a wolf’s paps, and in a thicket his mother reared him.’

STRALIE had stayed at Emu Rock while her friend waited her husband’s completion of the few months’ work after the general eviction necessary to complete the failure of Coocooroo, and Abbey had stayed also, constant as a shadow. Her own loneliness and her pity for Abbey had made her capitulate. The race was to the slow : Abbey was to be her husband after all. He looked at her, knowing that though she was content to marry him, she could never love him as she had loved Gifford ; that in the days to come, when she had mothered children, she would love him in the calm fashion of the middle-aged, while they were both yet young. He knew that this very human jealousy of his against the dead would blaze and flicker and smoulder by turns all their lives ; that all his devotion and single-heartedness would be slow to destroy her yearning memories of the man whose carelessness had led him away from happiness, and to his death.

They were seated on the veranda at Hempel’s house at Emu Rock ; not together like lovers, but separated by the bulging mass of the starlit night. There were fireflies in the oranges ; the scent of the frangipani came up from

the moist earth and smote Stralie back to the memory of that mad gallop in the lime, and made her forgetful of Abbey just as she was softening to him. And at the returned memory she sat back in her chair, and wondered if that perfume would always bring to her dreams of the presence of the mad galloper. She could feel again the broken petals and volutes falling from her hair as he had clasped her to him, while the big black horse surged beneath them like an angry sea. She felt that wild kiss still burning on her breast.

And then down the road came Charley Byers and Annie Johns, quarrelling, and making it up again, as usual. They had had their third quarrel that night as they passed the house by Emu Rock, and now they were making up in a hurry, being too near home and separation to prolong it to luxury.

‘You’ll always love me, won’t you, Charl?’

‘Always, pet.’

‘We won’t quarrel any more?’

‘No more, pet.’

‘You always say that. I s’pose when you say you love me you don’t mean it any more than the other?’

‘Yes, I do, Annie. Give us a kiss.’

‘I won’t. All you men are alike. Mother says her husband always told her he loved her before they married, but after—oh, he treated her dreadful!’

‘Which husband?’

‘Both of ’em: my father and this one—Jimmy.’

‘I’m not like them, Annie. Give us a kiss.’

‘Sure you won’t treat me badly?’

‘Course I won’t. Why, I couldn’t treat you badly. I love you.’

‘Do you, really?’

‘Of course. Give us a kiss.’

‘Well, I suppose you do. And these unhappy couples couldn’t have loved really.’

‘Course they didn’t. We do, though. Give us a kiss.’

They kissed—standing not thirty feet from Abbey and Stralie, who were hidden in the gloom of the veranda—and kissed again, satisfied they were the only two who had ever known, or would know, love, which they rather believed they had invented, whereas, indeed, love had invented them.

‘There! Don’t squeeze too hard, Charl. . . . There, that ’ll do. . . . Come on. . . . Mother ’ll be waiting. . . . Oh, COME ON!’

Cupid pulled the strings of his two most recent puppets, and they danced a school-girl’s toe-trip down the road to Girofla.

THE END

